

THE SPORTSMAN'S BEDSIDE BOOK

THE 'BB' BOOKS

Illustrated by D. J. Watkins-Pitchford

THE SPORTSMAN'S BEDSIDE BOOK

WILD LONE

MANKA: THE STORY OF A WILD GOOSE

THE IDLE COUNTRYMAN

THE COUNTRYMAN'S BEDSIDE BOOK

THE FISHERMAN'S BEDSIDE BOOK

THE SHOOTING MAN'S BEDSIDE BOOK

A STREAM IN YOUR GARDEN

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

THE LITTLE GREY MEN

DOWN THE BRIGHT STREAM





The Long Hack Home

THE SPORTSMAN'S BEDSIDE BOOK

by

'BB'

*Illustrated by D. J. Watkins-Pitchford
and G. D. Armour*

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TO MY PARENTS

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MEETING HILL

The spring has come to Meeting Hill
And slow cloud shadows pass,
To cross the pattern of the plain
And climb the springing grass;
The tuneful sheep are scattered wide,
White pebbles on the down,
Now surely must I meet you there,
Beneath the beechen crown.

The summer comes to Meeting Hill
Where pillared beech boles stand,
Lifting their rounded canopies
Above the smiling land,
A joyous cuckoo shouts again
And shakes the hawthorn snow,
Pied wheatears flit the thymy slopes,
You must be there, I know.

Red autumn comes to Meeting Hill
And yet we never meet,
The bramble finches quit the mast
Before my eager feet,
But though I seek you through the trees
Or on the windy steep,
I ever walk alone, my dear,
That hill of singing sheep.

'The wonder of the world, the beauty and
the power, the shapes of things, their colours,
lights, and shades; these I saw.
Look ye also while life lasts.'



Chapter the First

The Long Hack Home

I lost the hounds to-day. After a rather slow hunt from Coldhangar we went towards the double mounds and blackthorn wilderness of Holidone covert.

And then I realized hounds had gone right away, and I could not for the life of me guess which way they had taken.

I found myself on a little grassy hill overlooking a purple waste of thorn and the country was misted with the first hint of evening. Far away I could see cattle grazing in a wide field, quite unperturbed. In another, little moving grey dots betokened a flock of sheep, likewise peaceably grazing, and it was evident hounds had not gone in that direction.

Such a short while back the woods in front of me had been full of bustling excitement and I could not believe that somewhere in a fold of the soft green fields the chase was still going on. Many must have noticed this—the rapidity with which the field can cover the ground and keep out of sight.

My horse was restless, turning his head this way and that as if to help me. I listened, holding my breath, but only a carrion crow cawed hoarsely from an oak in the hedgerow below.

Pigeons were coming in to Coldhangar, making for the ash poles at the top of the wood. They wheeled round once or twice before settling, and finally sank into the tree tops. Far away a farm dog was barking, and a little owl was calling its monotonous note, but there was no sound of horn or hound.

Once I thought I caught for a moment the stirring weep of horn music, a sound that seems so much part of the gentle winter-countryside of England.

Then I turned my horse's head about and set off for the long hack home. I find no joy in the modern way of hunting; going to the meet in cars and returning by car. There is almost as much poetry and pleasure in the shog home as in the chase itself. Pleasantly weary, and your horse also, it is a time for reflecting, it is as contemplative as fishing!

'Clip clop, clip clop'; the hedges, almost bare now, bob, bob alongside, and on one's boots and horse, splatters of mud tell of the heat and fire of the swinging gallop.

The blackbirds were chinking to bed, the sun was down, and now from cottage windows lights starred out, some orange and some red, though it was long till dark. The old roadman was tying a rush skip on the back of his rusty tricycle and would soon be home before his cosy cottage fire. There are worse jobs than his, thought I, always in the open air, among the wild creatures, winter and summer.

'No, Sir, I ain't seen th' 'ounds, they 'aint been past this way ... 'aint seed nothing of 'em.'

He clambered on to his tricycle and with forward jerks of his stained corduroys, propelled himself down the road.

Jackdaws and rooks were coming in to roost, long lines of them strung out across the fields, flying high; the daws with quicker wing beats and more talkative, the rooks mostly silent; perhaps they were too tired after their day's work in the fields.

Now at this hour, when the day is passing, one catches the true charm of 'England's midmost shires'. And the way to appreciate this country is on horseback. To my mind the pace is ideal, it is sufficiently varied to give interest, and there is no mode of travelling that is half as pleasant.

On a bicycle one moves too fast, and pedalling is an irksome business. Walking is tedious; no small wonder the wheel is one of man's earliest inventions! You might as well be a beetle, crawling through a cabbage patch. But on horseback you are up above the hedges, you can see beyond to the rolling meadows and little copses, and you can better appreciate the beauty of trees.

True, to some it gives a superiority complex, at least so I have noticed, and even the carter's lad feels somebody when he is astride his clopping steed. Some people are insufferable on horseback, especially little men who have an idea of themselves!

And so, on to the dark crest of Gibbet wood, where so many rare butterflies are found.

Last time I was here was in the heat of summer, with the meadow browns bobbing in the rides, and a lovely silver washed fritillary basking on a bramble blossom.

Now the mists hang down the rides, and bedward blackbirds are scolding.

It is only when we reach main roads that this magic is no more; there is little romance in petrol vapour and tar-mac.

Hieaway Draw

I have before my mind at this moment several pictures from to-day's run.

• One—and it is a picture I have seen many times—the pink-coated whipper-in sitting his horse by the side of a covert, with the trees purple-blue behind him. Everything about them tense and strung. Both have their ears pricked and there is that feeling of suspense in the air that takes hold of the imagination.

The huntsman has taken his hounds in quietly and without fuss, and for the moment there is little sound from Hieaway wood but the tearing scream of a startled jay.

Behind, above the wood, and grouped about the hill, the field, a mass of black and white and pink. The keen followers are feeling this same tense atmosphere, the bores are coffee-housing; only their horses are scanning the wood below, with questioning ears. Why must some people chatter? Surely we have enough time for that elsewhere, not by covert side when hounds are drawing.

But for a while the wood seems to hold its secret to itself. Maybe a startled pigeon flies upward, suddenly, from the oak tops, or a green woodpecker with dipping flight to the distant hedgerow. And then, as this morning, before the whimper of a

hound was heard, a glimpse of a rusty streak, slipping away up the ditch from the left-hand corner. Still the whipper-in does not move; surely he must have seen him!

Then, with a lovely crash of sound hounds speak, and the sentinel on the grey is galvanized to life.

Out of the wood-edge filter the hounds, scrambling over the laid binders and flinging themselves into the ditch where the russet leaves are scattered.

Some cannot scramble over in one effort but remain poised, shouting with baffled rage. Two hounds try to squeeze through the same gap in the fence and for a second they are wedged. Now, like magic, the whole pack comes filtering through, and goes tearing down the ditch, heads high and singing happily.

The huntsman comes through the gate, a vivid note of colour against the shadow of the overarching trees, and his horse is straining to be off.

Abruptly the coffee-housers break their chatter and gather up reins. Some find a loose girth and must fix it before they can be away. But all is movement now. Along the road cars start up their engines, and cyclists pedal furiously.

Sheep are running all in a mass, tails a-toss and with idiotic panic. The cattle run, altogether and lumbering, blowing great puffs of vapour as in the pictures of ancient dragons.

A moment ago all was so calm, and now there is the surge of the wind in one's ears and the squeak of leather and thrum of hooves.

From Hieaway he made for Tinton Dales and its rustling poplars by the pool, but he is far away now, that little bolt of red. On the cold plough above we lose him, and not for ten minutes do we find the scent again, despite wide casts by the greatest of all huntsmen. And then, at first a faltering hound speaks, beyond a distant headland, then others coming to him swell the sound and they are away again, rather slowly though, through the cattle foiled meadow below Holman's Hill.

There is a slight check at the road, and passing cars pull up, one

behind the other, into an exasperating barrier. And then on, at a screaming pace, down to the brook. But alas! on the heavy plough land beyond Dreughtone we lose him and no hound or man can tell which way he has gone.

We did not find at Blackshaw so the Master took hounds across o Fenwood and there, as is nearly always the case, we found a fox.

There is some of the finest country you could wish to gallop over, those wide rolling fields beyond the wood, all the way to Foxtone, with its deserted church and daw haunted elms. Once a flourishing little town, the old folks say that it was wiped out by the Black Plague, and now nothing remains but a few scattered cottages, mostly in ruins, and the grim old church with its single cracked bell.

The fox must have gone straight through the churchyard for the hounds went feathering about between the lichened tombstones. From the line they took the fox must have gone over the last resting-place of Benjamin Noble, departed this life A.D. 17... (and the rest I could not decipher), and out under the wicket gate. We lost him in the valley beyond, and after that I hacked home.

The Tramp Round

What joy it was to see the sun this afternoon after so many days of grey, weeping skies! It was also a relief to get away from business cares and tramp about the fields. My first shot of the afternoon came at the little oak spinney. The pools and reeds had been drawn blank and also the marsh, but in the spinney the spaniel gave tongue and a rabbit slipped through the wire fence and went over the plough. I took a long shot. His white scut waved a farewell. Then along by the little bridge another broke cover and I rolled him over, though the sun was in my eyes. A second later a carrion crow topped the hedge and saw me standing below. He turned but I got in the right barrel and he crumpled up.

Soon afterwards, the spaniel, a long way ahead, put out a rabbit that ran towards me down the side of the hedge. I fired and

it fell kicking down the bank. Then along the high ridge, where I disturbed a heron fishing a horse-pond, and over the country lane to a straggling thorn hedge, where abides a wild black rabbit. This animal has given me the slip for three successive Saturdays. Very soon I shot another rabbit up this very hedge, but there was no sign of the black rabbit. I was walking along through the tussocky grass when I suddenly spied something in the centre of a large grass tussock. It was my old friend! Laying the gun down, I crept up and suddenly fell upon the black object, pinning it to the ground. Then I drew it out. Sure enough it was my little friend, as sooty as any blackamoor, and the only touch of white about him was the white of his rolling, frightened eye. I have never before had a wild black rabbit in my hands, and this one interested me. The ears appeared to be shorter than those of a brown wild rabbit. Even his scut was black. Of course, I put him down and watched him run hell for leather for his favourite drain where he always goes to ground. My spaniel thought it was a black cat and gave vociferous pursuit. I do not suppose I shall have the heart to shoot him now.

A naturalist friend showed me a puffin that was picked up dead outside Northampton, and as I know a boy who is keen on taxidermy I have given it to him. It was a young bird and the bill was not fully developed. On examination it was found to have a shot lodged in the body under the wing. The bird had obviously come in from the coast, and it is interesting to speculate on its story. This same friend also told me of a toad that was found last week by ironstone workers a full eighteen feet down in the earth. It was found in a small cavity in the solid earth, and though feeble, was still alive.

Have you noticed how some cartridges fail to give confidence when shooting and others inspire one with a superiority complex and you do not miss a bird? I have been shooting with a certain brand of cartridge these last few weeks and quite forty per cent. found their billet, but this brand running out, I changed to another and have missed or shot badly since. I do not think it is the fault

of the loading, as I have opened some and found them quite normal in every way, but perhaps the colour puts me off. Another point which makes for good shooting is fitness of body and mind. To shoot well you must be mentally alert, and when one is below par, whether through work and worry or 'late nights', you will not shoot with any degree of accuracy.

I have not yet shot Hicaway wood and the leaves must be completely off the trees before I go. But this last week I have been clearing up the rabbits on the home shoot and I come back with as many as I can carry. Wet, muggy days are best for hedge-hunting rabbits; they seem to sit tight in the ditches and allow the spaniel to get close before bolting. On bright, sunny days they will lie out in rough pastures but not in the hedges. No duck have come this year to the pools and I cannot understand the reason, unless it be the increase in the traffic on the adjoining main road.

Autumn Afternoon

Just the afternoon for a tramp round the home shoot, with a fresh westerly breeze and intermittent sunlight! The marsh and pools yielded no shot and the first came at the little spinney on the hill. I have noticed that these last few Saturdays this has been the case, no rabbits lying out in the reeds but several in the undergrowth of the spinney. Very soon I saw the spaniel stiffen at a clump of underwood and a rabbit slipped out, not over the plough, but in and out between the stems of the ash poles. My shot missed. A minute later Sport put another out and I missed this also, but the rabbit ran into the boundary hedge and the spaniel hunting up towards me, it broke cover in the corner of the spinney and ran along the edge of the plough. My first shot rolled it over.

Then along beside the brook the spaniel put out a rabbit on the other side of the hedge. I was standing on the railing and was just in time to see it jump a ditch and make off behind some posts. I fired hurriedly and the shot sped true, and I saw the dog get it. Then along the brook-side to the stone bridge and up to a large rough grass field beyond. Here the spaniel suddenly gave

a short bark and I saw a rabbit tearing along on the other side of the hedge towards me. I could hardly see it behind the branches, but I fired and was surprised to see the dog retrieve it.

Now the short afternoon was beginning to darken. Away beyond the bare purple hedges and wooded heights of Countessbrook the sun was slanting down into a grey mass of cloud, while overhead clouds came scudding before a westerly gale. Quickly the light died and as I was nearing home Sport put out another rabbit that I could hardly see in the dusk.

The Meet on the Green and Gibbet Wood Run

We had a splendid run yesterday from Gibbet wood, and after a hunt of an hour and five minutes ran into our fox near Miller's spinney, a point of six miles and a splendid line of country.

First . . . the meet on the village green, below the tall elms. The sun shining like an April morning and a bustle of cars and horse boxes, grooms and second horsemen, pink and white, black and white; as busy as an ants' nest under the trees. Across the road and the village green, blue shadows patterning, and a host of foot people, all moving hither and thither, laughing and chattering. High in the elm tops the twiggy bundles of the rooks' nests, and jackdaws busy about the holes as though they were contemplating nest building at mid-winter. Then comes the ring of hooves and the sound of hounds being called by name, and here they come with their huntsman, through the interlacing shadows; fleeting shadows that turn for a second the vivid pink of the huntsman's coat to a cool rose red. The hounds, friendly and nuzzling, cropped ears as soft as velvet to the touch. Orator I see, strong of loin and straight of back, with many a straight-necked fox to his credit, making acquaintance, in gentlemanly fashion, with a small child hardly a head taller than himself.

The waving sterns are like peeled willow wands through which the breeze is playing. Some hounds sit apart in contemplation, happily smiling to themselves. Others are scrounging on the chance of a tit-bit; and one, Emperor I think, but I cannot be sure

from here, is investigating the roots of one of the elms, where he eventually leaves a note.

With every moment more riders come to swell the whirlpool of colour, this open green space is as busy as a springtime pond where frogs are spawning. For every road and lane is filled with horsemen, cars, and people, all converging to the same spot. The wheeling daws must have a wonderful view, circling in the sunlight, appearing like metal-clad birds as they turn. Below them this hub of changing colour and every radiating road dotted with people and cars, drawn by some mysterious impulse to the spot.

And then, still taking the wheeling jackdaws' view, a change comes about. The stream begins to flow down the village street (where, in the June evenings, the swifts scream past the thatched eaves), a stream narrow at the head, a pink spot at the fore, the waving sterns filling the lane from brim to brim, and then the mass of the field behind.

A mile away Gibbet wood dreams in a false security in the pale sunshine; a flock of wood-pigeons feeding in the green fields below is unaware of the approaching host. Within the wood the birds are going about their daily business and three 'hairies' are peacefully grazing near the rusty beech hedge, hair over eyes, and their sturdy legs, wide like sailors' trousers, matted with earth.

One of the wood-pigeons on the outskirts of the flock has raised its head, listening, and his white collar shows in the sunlight. The three hairies have likewise stopped their tearing of the grass and are waiting with ears a-cock by the side of the russet hedge.

High above Gibbet wood a kestrel is crucified against the soft blue of the sky. It wheels and slides away, downwards and slanting, for it sees the river flooding towards the wood. A ragged rascal of a magpie goes away, with wavering flight and backward glance over his white shoulder; Gibbet wood is uneasy this lovely morning.

Charles James slipped out from the north corner, where the crab apples lie rotting green in the ditch, and the hollow pipes of hemlock stand stiffly and sharp. And then hounds were running in the glorious morning, exultant and musical.

The pigeons fly away as a blue cloud of smoke drifts from a gun. I can see them now against the purple tones of the wood. Every gateway is a dam, holding for a fleeting minute, but unavailingly, the surging of the torrent. With the grace of sable swallows skimming a roof tree, some of the field take the beech hedge. One man on a big chestnut takes a nasty toss and rolls into the ditch, and for a moment lies with a horrid inertness, his horse galloping on with swinging stirrup and staring foolish eyes. The nearest horsemen wheel about and come to the figure, stirring now like a drunken insect in the ditch.

On, on past Dingle mill and the osier beds . . . rose-red in the sunlight—across the glittering Marly brook as it winds through intimate little meadows, oak studded and remote, haunts of otter and moorhen. Across the main road to the gorse on the hill and here there is a check of some minutes, and we fear he has gone to ground. But the earth was well stopped—Jim Corfield will get drunk on this—and so to the village of Hinton Hine with its squat little church sitting like a hen partridge on its nest, and the white-haired rector watching from the kitchen garden.

In the park behind we lost him for a space but he was 'halloed' away by a roadman, and for the first time I saw the fox, muddy of brush and with hanging head, crossing, for an instant, a gap in a tall bullfinch. How strange that it is so seldom the majority of the field ever views the fox from start to finish! Led it seems by an invisible thread, the whole mass of the field is drawn along over hill and down dale, as though they had gone completely mad.

The end was sad, and I saw it and was troubled. The main body of the pack were running down one side of the hedge when the fox doubled back. But Orator and two trusty henchmen had elected to go through to the other side and met the fox as it doubled. The fox saw the hounds running in at him, and slipped like a stoat through a gap between two stout laid thorns. And there he met his end, swiftly it is true, and gamely withal. The mass of hounds engulfed him and turned, then the sterns were

waving in a ring and a minute later there floated back a trembling note of horn music.

Far away, by Gibbet wood, the hairies were again at graze, giving no thought for what had passed nor caring where the hunt had gone. The winter sward was poached and cut by the hoof marks of the host, gashes in the hedge and broken sticks showed where flying hooves had caught and blundered, and a big speckled thrush was pulling out a worm that had come up inside a hoof mark to see what all the thunder was about.

And the gentleman on the big chestnut, with his top hat over his ears, was drinking something out of a flask by Miller's spinney. His little finger was broken and it was painful.

Dawn on the Wash

I write this by my fireside in the Midlands. A matter of twelve hours or so ago I was watching the dawn grey in the east and the sea beginning to shine palely in the dim light. I was listening to the most wonderful sound in the world, wild geese gabbling and talking out on the high sands preparatory to flighting into the land. And as the light grew, the clamour grew, and with a sudden tightening of the heart, I saw them coming, a long black rope, a 'swarm of geese', clawing along over the marshes. They headed directly for me but I bobbed up too soon and with a great outcry they turned away.

Silly! I should have known better. I was within a few yards of the place where I shot my first goose years ago, one bitter January morning when the frost crusted the herbage of the marsh. So you see I missed my chance and, of course, several other skeins that came in later were too high and not in my line. But I had a right and left at redshank and missed a curlew very badly. It is ten months since I heard the cry of wild geese and sniffed the dawn wind, and it seemed too wonderful to be back once more, even for so fleeting a visit. In a few weeks now I hope to have a solid fortnight of unadulterated joy, and maybe a bernicle will fall to my gun—my first bernicle.

I was annoyed this morning at the manner of several ignorant and unthinking shooters on the marsh, and now I lodge a complaint. Please, please remember, you would-be fowlers, that to wander about the muds in front of the marsh just when the flight is beginning simply isn't done! Please remember that there are probably ten or fifteen other wildfowlers who have come from long distances for one fleeting chance at a goose, and that to behave in such foolish fashion is unthinking and unkind, besides being unsportsmanlike!

Yesterday morning was a case in point. Geese were resting on the marsh-edge and I could see them in the dim light, a company numbering about forty odd birds. They were waiting to come in, and their line would have been over me and other gunners lining the wall. Some miserable 'pipit popper' (as Colonel Hawker would have named the creature) ambled aimlessly out across the marsh, nearly falling over me in his course. Hearing the geese gabbling in the darkness he walked over and put the lot up, sending them right over the bay, and then sat about ten yards away and blazed at gulls and could not even hit those poor harmless birds.

Such behaviour makes my blood boil. For goodness' sake get out on the marsh and hole up before dawn, and don't move about! My car ran out of petrol near the wall and I endeavoured to beg some from two opulent persons with a caravan. One of these men told me he had brought a rifle to shoot at the geese as they came over, a most miserable practice. As I made my way back to the hotel I saw seven geese come over the bank very low, the early morning sun shining on their breasts.

Autumn Evening

A most beautiful afternoon, sunny and warm, but frost to-night. I visited the ponds without success, but as I had fired at a rabbit on the way down the meadows, the shot may have put them up. Striking up the hill past the spinney, I crossed the two large stubble fields on the crown of the valley, and on the far slope, near a little brook, six partridges rose suddenly, topping the thorn

hedge. I fired a hurried shot and one dropped through the thorns into the stream. Farther on, a snipe rose close to a withy bed in easy range, but I missed badly.

As the light was beginning to fade I turned for home, to see a fine red sun burning down behind the spinney of ash poles. Wood-pigeons were dropping in by twos and threes and I went to the side of the spinney and waited for a while. Several passed over with half-closed wings preparatory to alighting, but they are hard to shoot through a tracery of twigs and I held my fire for a better shot. This, however, never came and I continued my way up past the pools. My spaniel managed to put a rabbit out of the same reed bed where I bagged one last week and I knocked him over. A lot of fog hung about the marshy hollows and the air was bitterly cold. Once I thought I heard a duck quacking from the upper pool, but a stealthy peep over the bank only disclosed two moorhens feeding near the island and an early star shaking in the water.

The Path to the Pools

A grey afternoon was waning when I took the path to the pools. Across the marsh the noble group of oaks still retained most of their leaves, but the herbage in the marsh itself was withering fast. The russets of the reeds and the soft amber of the oaks made a lovely harmony and the quiet colours were reflected in the still waters of the middle pool. This lake is so overgrown with weeds that it would cost a small fortune to have it cleaned out. Ten years ago it was a fine sheet of water, full of great carp and the playground for wildfowl. Now the ever-narrowing reed beds have hemmed in the water until scarcely twenty square yards remain.

Water rail find harbourage in its treacherous fastnesses and, later on, snipe in abundance. It is the last pool that the duck still frequent, and when I got near I moved quietly, treading delicately on the withered leaves, my spaniel close behind with pricked ears.

Through the naked branches of a thorn I saw moorhen moving about the pool, pecking and splashing in the reeds. Then

I saw two small brown duck out in the middle. They were suspicious and were 'backing' water with erect heads. The light was going and the range was great, about eighty yards, and it looked a forlorn hope; nearer it was impossible to approach, for there was no cover whatever, and I was in a quandary. Should I fire and chance it? Or lie in wait for the birds to swim nearer? But my spaniel settled things for me. Unheeding my angry whisperings he ran forward, out from behind the low bank, and the duck rocketed up straight into the air. The gun went up instinctively and the echoes went tumbling down the wooded valley. The air was so damp that a large cloud of pungent blue smoke hung like a pall over the water; moorhen scuttled for the reed beds in terror. In the fading light I saw the two duck, apparently unscathed, skimming the low green hill on the opposite side of the pool, but as I watched I saw one slant suddenly downwards and apparently hit the ground. I thought I saw the underneath of a feebly flapping wing, so I ran across the 'divide' and vaulted the fence. When I came panting up the hill I found a drake teal lying dead in the withered grass—a great prize this, for I have not shot a teal on my water for a very long while. Every autumn at about this time I get them in for a few days but rarely can get a shot at them.

Coming home, the spaniel pushed out a rabbit from the reeds, and though the light was so bad, I rolled him over at the mouth of the 'burry'.

A good stroll round, definitely a good stroll round! These puny bags may seem very unimportant to some but they mean great enjoyment to me. Where true game is scarce it is doubly prized, and unexpected happenings such as this mean a great deal.

Over the Wolds

A 'wold' afternoon. The frost and snow had gone; the sun shone from a sky of tranquil blue, tempered to a violet haze on the horizon. Up the ride, close to the spot where I always leave my car, a rabbit was at home, but despite gallant efforts by Sport to

dislodge it from a pile of hedge clippings, the little rascal gave us the slip and left the wrong side of the hedge.

And then on, over the brook where the cattle were grouped round the gateway, their breath showing in misty puffs against the dead hues of the field, and up over the rolling high land. It may have been the afternoon was too fine, or it may have been that the beagles had disturbed the game, but never do I remember this shoot so devoid of life. The only shot I had was at a pigeon that passed over high. I think I scored a hit for the bird swooped down and lit in an ash, where I could see it shaking its feathers.

Where the tall poplars grow in the little spinney I sat down under an oak for a smoke. Golden rods of light shone across the field and lit up everything with a soft mellow veneer as I sat puffing the pipe of peace.

Winter seemed far away as I sat there, gun across my knees, and a thread of blue smoke rising from my pipe. Over the rim of the hill the sun went slanting down, and a long string of sheep went climbing up a well-worn path on the slope opposite.

I thought of the day, long years ago, when a skein of wild geese came out of the winter sky and pitched on these very wolds, much to the amazement of the rustics. They talk of it yet down in the village; how farmer Pearce went out with his muzzle-loader and stalked them behind a cart, bagging two at one giant discharge.

But the westering sun soon dipped low and I got up and knocked out my pipe on the rough bark of the oak.

When I got home I 'cut' tea and strolled down to the lake to see if a duck was in. The fast-fading light made a mirror of the quiet water, and as I stood watching, my eyes nearly popped out of my head. Into the mirror swam three wild duck, alert and with erect heads.

The light was so bad that if I took a flying shot I should never see them, so I levelled my gun at the leading silhouette and fired. Across the water the shot cut a great furrow, and there was a quacking and a flapping of wings. But though the spaniel swam

about, grunting hopefully, he brought in no duck, and I fear I never touched a feather. Shooting a duck on the wafer is a difficult business, and in the fading light it is doubly hard. So the afternoon was a complete blank, the first for a long time.

A Wildwood Fox

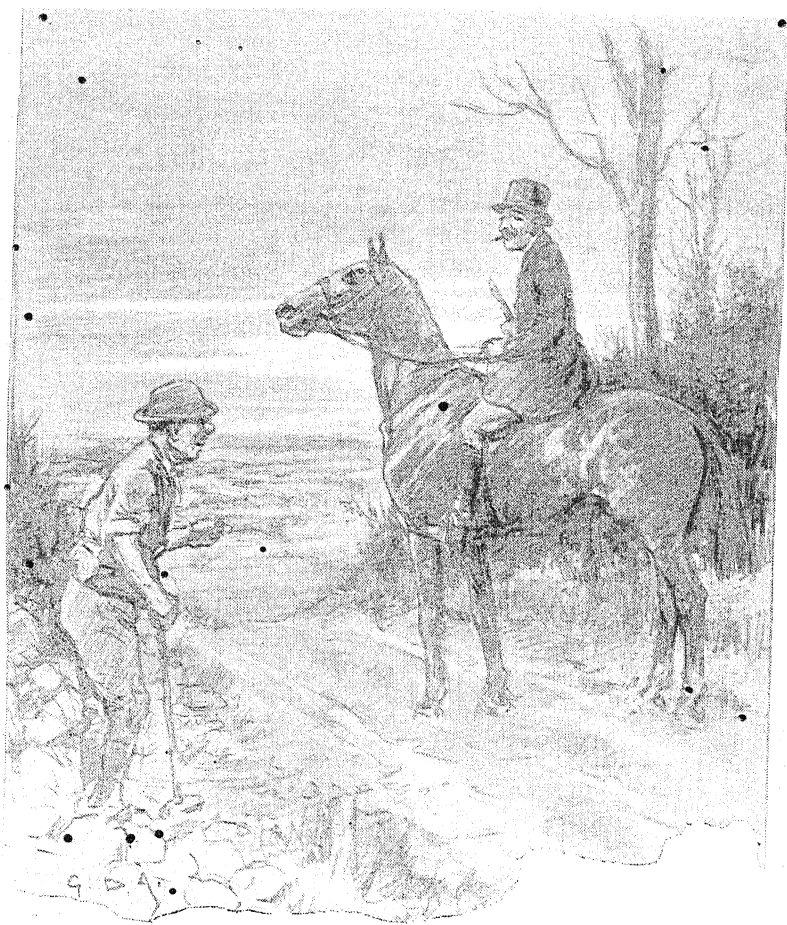
Wildwood . . . A November afternoon . . . the grey light, colourless and drab, and a film of gummy ice on the pool under the trees.

I have seen this wood so often, under all conditions, and this afternoon I thought I had never seen it looking so desolate. We had come across from Coldhangar, which was drawn a blank, and now, as a last hope, the Master tried Wildwood.

About ten or fifteen years ago the wood was replanted with firs and now these have grown into a nice little plantation where foxes like to lie. The wood, set in a hollow of the fields, is very warm and sheltered, and, as we found this afternoon, a fox was lying up under the little trees. As soon as the first hound went in under the shadows there came a deep response and soon others joined. The fox went away down wind, over the low wall, and in a minute the halloo showed which way he had gone.

But an annoying thing happened, which shows how foil can spoil a good scent. Two fields away is another little spinney, a very small affair of only a few acres, mostly ash poles and a little underwood. Here there was a fire of hedge clippings sending its trail of scented blue smoke low across the field, and the acrid vapour hung low for the air was damp.

When hounds came to this reek they seemed utterly at fault. The huntsman got hold of his hounds and made a cast beyond. But the strong acrid tang must have got into their noses and for quite ten minutes or more we could not pick up the line. When at last we did so, hounds hunted slowly towards Beddows spinney, and dusk coming on, the Master called off hounds. But though it had been a disappointing day, for my part I was quite happy. In no other way can one get such pleasure in the countryside as riding over it, far from roads and off the beaten track.



'No sir, I ain't seen th' 'ounds'



'Making acquaintance, in gentlemanly fashion'

With six miles to home my way led through some charming country and the air was sweet with the scent of wood and hedge-row. I often think the country smells as sweet in winter—especially on such a day as this, when there is little breeze—as in summer. From the woods comes the aromatic tang of decaying leaves—to my mind, most pleasant of all scents—and the sodden winter-bitten grass is scented too.

And the beauty of the trees is more noticeable in winter. The growth and character is better seen, and I do not think I have ever realized before how wonderfully graceful the common ash may be. One in particular I noticed, with its long slender branches sweeping downwards, and the tips of each twig turning up again in a charming curve. From the twigs clusters of dead ash keys hung in bat-like clusters, and for some time I watched a pair of bullfinches gathering seeds from these withered pods. Unlike other finches, the bullfinch seems to find food all the year round, even in hard weather, and they always seem in good condition and colour. Very rarely do you see these birds hunting alone. They mate for life and are extremely affectionate little birds, and in my opinion, the most lovely of all the British finches.

On some dead thistles I saw a swarm of goldfinches and these were very tame, taking no notice of myself or my horse. Suddenly they all rose in a twittering body, each with a dipping flight, and settled in the branches of an elm tree in the hedge. The red on a goldfinch's head does not carry well out of doors and this has always puzzled me. It appears more of a deep brown, though a caged goldfinch is usually most vivid about the head. The finch is becoming very common again here, due no doubt to the spread of thistles in the waste places.

When I came down the Hawking Tower lane I found a gypsy encampment on the turf margin, with the gypsies sitting round a roaring fire. In the dusk the flames lit up their faces, and they made a pretty picture. What hardy folk they must be! I always have a secret envy for them, with their free life, roaming the lanes wherever they will, always under the open sky.

My horse came down rather badly on the tar-mac near home and cut his knee. At first I thought no harm was done for when I dismounted I could not see any mark, but soon he was limping, and when I dismounted again, I saw rich beads of blood oozing from a nasty cut just below the knee. He will be fit in a day or two but these smooth slimy surfaces of modern roads are the worst possible things for horses.

It was dark by the time I reached home and I was nearly rammed by a car. As a matter of fact it is damnably hard to see a horse at night when driving a car, and I nearly ran down a groom the other night when driving home late down a narrow by-road. I think it would be an excellent thing for grooms and second horsemen to carry reflectors on their belts.

Little Brown Bird

Shot at F . . . , with a party of eight guns. I could not arrive until after lunch, and found the guns just moving off. This splendid shoot has not been shot over for some time and sport was excellent, moreover it was a perfect day with a misty sun struggling through, just the day for tramping the stubbles.

My first shot came about in this way. We were walking up some scrubby thorn and a large covey got up in front of the left-hand gun in the line. He was unprepared and missed with both barrels and a partridge came swerving across the line and offered a long shot as it turned. I could see the brown horseshoe on its tummy and my first shot crumpled it up.

We then walked another rough thorn pasture and a covey got up in front of me, I had a nice right and left. One bird I could not find, so, not having the dogs with us, I went back to my host and borrowed his retriever Jet. As I was walking back to join the other guns I saw the dog begin to quest about, and suddenly up got a lovely cock pheasant right under his nose. It was a lovely picture in the mellow sunlight, the burnished reds and greens of its plumage blending with the red-berried hedge behind. I dropped it cleanly and the dog brought it back to me. Continuing,

I took him over to the place where I dropped the partridge, but though we searched for some while, we could not find it.

I now joined the other guns, and after walking some stubbles and killing two hares, we came to a stretch of dead grass. Out of this flew a strange bird which I could not recognize. It had a long neck and rather long legs and was a fawn colour. One of the guns shot at it, bringing it down in a dense thorn hedge.

We did not find it, however, much to my sorrow, as nobody could guess what manner of bird it was. After bagging a woodcock out of a little spinney we went back to the cars. The total bag for the whole day was eight and half brace of partridge, five pheasants, three hares and a cock. On the whole quite a nice little mixed bag.

I have just had a letter from a subaltern friend who is wild-fowling in Scotland. He has discovered a most wonderful place for wild geese and up to date, in four days, he has shot nine geese, greylags (a right and left), two 'bernies', and five pink feet. I hope to go to this locality before long, though the geese may not be there later in the year.



Chapter the Second

First Snow

A very small field turned out for the meet to-day and nobody expected to do much good. Bitterly cold and with a powdering of snow on the ground, it hardly looked a good scenting day. After the meet at Shelford Priors we went into the woodland country and soon found a fox. Scent seemed to be fairly good, it very often is in soft snow, but it was slow work and no chance of a rattling gallop.

What pleased me more perhaps than the actual hunting, was the colourful woods. With the white background, the colouring of trees is intensified, especially old trees, and in this tract of country there are some old trees; enormous wide-girthed oaks, knobbly and rough, some with a few rusty leaves still adhering, beech-like, to lower branches. One giant had been riven by lightning and was split from head to root, a very paradise for owls.

Rabbit tracks were everywhere, and in one place, where an ash, quite a sapling, had been broken down, one could see where the rabbits had been busy. The bark had been stripped off, leaving the pale sappy stick beneath, and the tracks criss-crossed in every direction.

What a picture for an artist, though! The pink-coated huntsmen under the trees, lovely against the white background; the staring black of habits, and the black and tan of hounds!

• But it was 'tally ho! over' all the morning and people soon went home. I stayed, however, and we killed a brace of foxes in the afternoon—useful work because these woodlands must be hunted if we are to have any sport in the good country. The loveliest thing I saw was a large flock of bramblings, feeding under

the beeches. They have a curious call note, and it was this that first attracted my attention. A cock brambling is almost as richly coloured as a woodcock; and though they frequently feed with chaffinches, they are easily told apart, being a much larger bird and more heavily built.

Late in the afternoon snow began to fall, and I went home alone, losing my way in the little lanes behind Shelford old hall. Hardly a sound did my horse make on the snowy road, and what a joy, an utter joy, was this England under snow!

What use are riches unless we use them well, unless we can enjoy to the fullest extent our glorious heritage? It is these little fields and woods of winter England that I have in my heart; the glimpse of a fine old house down some rooky avenue, the squat village churches nestling amid the purple bare trees and a pink coat turning in at the squire's gate. Those are indeed the precious things, more precious perhaps because they are slowly vanishing, and maybe before many generations of rooks have hatched from their twiggy hives, they will be no more.

The first to go are the great houses, and alas! how many. And with them departs all dignity and glory that made England. Life may be fairer to the great masses of the peoples; there will be more chances for everyone perhaps, and nobody will be rich. But there will be no woods then, and no little winding roads; and only the high hills will watch the change that is coming, and remain the same. And those hills will look down on wars and unhappiness and the end of all peace.

And then, when all the striving is over, and the gods weep secretly over man's perversity, those hills will still be there, caressed by the winds and rains and sun, listening no longer to the faint sheep voices, but to the curlews crying and the breeze singing in the heather. And never a man will climb those hills again.

Pigeon Ambush

Pressure of business prevented me from getting home in time to shoot this afternoon, whereat I was greatly disappointed. Never-

theless, I had a most enjoyable half hour in my own grounds, which I shall now describe.

• This past week wood-pigeon have been coming in large flocks to raid some holly trees in a shrubbery close to the house, and every afternoon they have attended, just before sunset, with unfailing regularity. Being so busy, I have been unable to attend to them myself, and I told the man to leave them alone, and let them get what a fowler terms, 'a say'. So directly I had come in I got my rifle and a pocketful of cartridges, and hid myself in some low shrubs within range of the holly trees. Sitting on a folded rug, I was well concealed and lighting a pipe, I sat down to await events.

About thirty yards distant from this ambush there grows a great cedar and twenty yards to the left a Turkey oak, where the pigeons are in the habit of roosting these winter evenings. Far away a songthrush was singing his heart out, and as I waited rooks went drifting overhead on their way to roost. There was a spring feeling in the air, and a woodman chopping in the park was plainly audible. Suddenly there was a 'swoosh', and a large grey body passed over my hide and landed with a clap in the cedar. From where I sat I could see only the pigeon's tail, a large limb hiding the top half of his body. But after agitations of the tail he sidled down the branch and offered an easy target, silhouetted against the pale evening sky. I brought the gun cautiously up and was just on the point of pressing the trigger when two more lit in the tree behind, but the leaves of the evergreen hid them both from view. While I was hesitating, the bird in the cedar launched himself off the bough and landed in the midst of the red holly berries where he began to feast right royally, practically hidden from view. The shaking branches were maddening, and I half thought of shooting into the midst of the tree, a foolish thing to do. But my forbearance was rewarded, for the next moment three more arrived, flying direct to the holly and landing with a great clapping amid the green shiny leaves. I fired, and the hollow nose .22 long sped true.

At the report a surprising thing happened. The two birds in the Turkey oak behind me left hurriedly, and circling, lit in the cedar on the very bough where the first pigeon landed! Here they sat, looking about on all sides, as thin as rakes, and my second shot brought one of them down into the holly. His heavy body crashed through the thinner branches and hit the ground with a loud thump most satisfying to hear.

Now for a space all was again quiet. The distant thrush again took up the thread of his song and the far chopping was resumed. I pictured the old woodman far away in the misty park, stopping in his task to listen to the shots. The sun burned down behind the elms, showing like a red-hot coal between the bars of a grate. 'Swoosh, swoosh', another pigeon, sitting outlined on the cedar crown! I fired, and he too fell, but caught on one of the flat branches. A well-aimed stone dislodged the body however, and added one more to a very satisfying little bag.

Chicken Stealer

The bitch pack found a chicken stealer in Jackson's root field, after the meet at Hinton Hine this morning, and he took us away at a rattling pace towards Holidone great wood. But he turned left-handed before the wood and went down into the valley below Marly church. Here there was a check, and a mizzling rain did not help matters. It was cold work hanging about and I walked my horse across to Holidone spinney.

A curious bird flew out of the thorns close to the hand-gate and perched on the lower branches of an ash tree. I saw it was a hawfinch, a rare bird round here. In twenty years I have only found one nest and this was in a may tree at the bottom of the home paddock. They are curiously foreign birds in appearance and colouring, reminding one of the parrot family.

In the spinney the bone-coloured grass was over knee high, and wild privet bushes were a mass of blue-black berries. On these two bullfinches were feeding, cracking the seeds hidden in the pulpy fruit. The colour of a bullfinch's cap is exactly the hue

of the privet berry, and has the same bluish bloom. On a horse you can approach wild birds and animals much better than on foot, and these finches were feeding within a few feet of me.

It was one of those grey winter days when there seems to be no colour anywhere. Some people find such weather depressing but there is a certain charm to me in the softened distances and dewy trees.

Soon I heard the sound of the horn, weeping 'gone away', and wheeling, I saw hounds streaming away towards Tinton hill and galloping riders going over the ridge towards Holidone. I made a lucky nick and caught up with the field on the other side of the hill and it was pleasant to have a warming gallop over good grass between the hill and the railway.

My horse came down with me on the other side of an oxer, but there was no damage done and I caught him without trouble. After crossing the railway hounds lost their fox on some foiled ground and then they went across to draw Hieaway wood. I went home, so of course, as is always the case, missing one of the best runs, so far, of the season; a hunt of two hours and a six-mile point, killing their fox in the woodland country just at dusk!

Near Harburn village I saw a vast flock of fieldfares and starlings feeding in a big grass field on the right of the road and some of the fieldfares were close to the hedge. I have never before realized what a handsome bird a fieldfare is, with his blue-grey rump and rich brown back. They are, I believe, excellent eating, and the country people used to net them as they roosted in the tall straggling hedges. Talking of fieldfares reminds me that my brother found, when he was a boy, a fieldfare's nest in a little fir wood in Warwickshire, and I have the egg now in my collection. I notice them about sometimes as late as mid May and have also heard them singing. When the fieldfare is feeding he is a wary bird, always standing high from the ground and keeping a constant watch, in the manner of a pigeon. Different indeed from the starling who, once he settles on his feeding ground, bustles and waddles about with never a look about him. When at feed, star-

lings are continually bickering and quarrelling among themselves, sometimes rising into the air and fighting.

I had a letter from a friend this morning telling me that a white-fronted goose was shot near Northampton last week. It was on flood water and swimming with mallard. Wild geese come every winter to the river valleys in the Oundle district where they stay all winter, fighting out from the flood water to feed on the rich grass lands.

Postscript

How curious it is that people who have much to do with horses develop a certain expression, a hardness of feature that is not altogether pleasant! This is especially noticeable in grooms and jockeys, most pronounced in horse dealers, and is, to a certain extent, present in 'gentleman riders'.

Sailors have also a certain cast of feature, especially noticeable about the eyes. Hard-bitten hunting men, and in a lesser degree women, can be told anywhere by a student of human nature. The face is lined in a curiously hard way. Perhaps it is caused by continual exposure to wind and rain, and the rush of air. Horse dealers have, I suppose, to tell so many lies in the course of their profession that they naturally develop a rather shifty, set expression!

Misty Meadows

At the beginning of the week, when the frost was severe, I managed to get an afternoon off, and with the ground like iron I thought of snipe and where I might find them. I got out my dust shot and with the spaniel went down to the marsh, but found no snipe at home. I then motored to another shoot about two miles away where I sometimes find them in hard weather. The first two springs down in the valley proved blank so I turned my attention to a flock of about ninety pigeon which were feeding in a clover field. A stalk was made along the side of a hill—you must stalk the 'woodie' as carefully as geese—and I found my way barred by a fence and stream. As I have never before found a snipe at this spot

I was not ready when, as I was crawling over the grass at the head of the spring, one rose almost under my feet. He was so close I could see his round black eye and the rich markings on his back. The pigeon saw me and I never got a shot.

This afternoon, as soon as I returned, I posted off to the same shoot. Everywhere was shrouded in a thick pall of fog and I had in mind the pigeon that I had seen earlier in the week. They were not on the stubble so I went across the field towards the little spring. How ghostly the world seems when shrouded in mist! On either side the stubble stretched away apparently without limit and it was with quite a shock of surprise that I realized I was almost at the spring. Would the snipe be there? As I climbed the rails and dropped on to the green sloping bank above, my eyes scanned the trickle of half-frozen water. I could see no sign of any living thing, and if a snipe had been there I must surely have seen him, for there were no rushes and scarce a tuft of screening grass. But I held the gun at the ready and began to walk down the water-course. I had taken perhaps twenty paces when there was a sputter that sent my heart into my mouth. The snipe rose left-handed and swerving. My left barrel, charged with number eight, spoke, but the swerving shape sped on into the mist. A fraction's pause and I fired my second barrel, charged with number six, and at once I saw the snipe was hit. The legs dropped and the wing-beats faltered, then I lost it in the mist. Quickly I jumped the rails, and, cocking my gun, charged with eight shot in each barrel, I walked over the frozen stubble. A few paces and there he lay, perfectly dead.

Changing my shot I crossed the stubble to another clover field on the far side of the main road and as I showed myself over the wall several pigeon took wing. Before very long I had shot eight of them, following them from tree to tree and shooting at long range with number three shot. Every shot fired told and it was only when I changed to sixes that I began to fail to stop the birds.

Coming home over the misty fields I saw a partridge running between some thistles. I approached with caution and up it got.

I fired and saw it crumple in the air—a fine fat ‘Frenchman’ in the pink of condition.

Wind over the Hill

Night after night I listen to the weather forecast from London, and with a dreary monotony I hear the announcer’s voice repeat the same words: ‘Continuing mild, mild weather with some rain.’ Cannot you imagine our old friend Colonel Hawker getting up and stamping round the room, muttering and cursing to himself: ‘Butterfly weather, doctors doing a roaring trade, birds whistling and full churchyards,’ etc.?

I, for one, am getting impatient at the dreary succession of sunless, muggy days, for it means a blank time on the north-east coast, where I hope to be ere long. Up to the present there have been no reports of the brents having arrived.

I spent yesterday pike fishing with two friends—an annual fixture for that date—and caught a fine pike just before dusk. He took my live bait twice before I got into him, but as soon as I struck I knew he was mine.

This afternoon I shot the wolds with the usual ill success. Soon after one o’clock an icy gale suddenly arose. This Arctic-wind came roaring over the bright green fields (there is no withered grass on the meadows, it might be April) and set the bare branches clashing and squeaking, tossing the rooks about and blowing the finches inside out. These small birds are miserable in a high wind, for if they but get their flanks turned to the blast they are spun round. I tramped moodily round the usual fields and my ill-humour was not mended by the fact that the old buck rabbit, as grey as a badger, that usually lies up in the horse pond, was put out by the spaniel before I got within striking distance. As I climbed the barren ridge of the higher wold I met the full force of the icy gale, and as I was battling along, hugging a miserable hedge of shrieking thorns, a covey got up into the teeth of the wind. They were tossed back over my head, but, spinning on my heel, I got in the choke barrel and saw one bird fall. This is the

first partridge I have shot on these wild hills for many a day. The sound of the wind had drowned my approach.

Then a curious phenomenon occurred. Within the space of ten minutes, or perhaps less, this icy gale dropped, a watery sunset came blearily forth and the thrushes began to sing again. In the twinkling of an eye winter had hustled over the hill and spring came back with its smug, self-satisfied air.

All the foreign pigeon that were here a few weeks back have taken themselves off. Snowdrops are coming up in the garden and I noticed the hedge-bottoms full of a new green growth—nettles, sorrel and the like—a thing I have never seen before at this time of year.

I came in late, comfortably tired and uncomfortably hot. I turned on the wireless and lit a pipe. I was just in time. The 'golden voice' began . . . "weather will continue mild with continuous rain". I switched off!

Starling Choirs and Rook Lore

Hacking home with a companion this evening down a little muddy lane, I noticed a curious sound. It was a musical rushing roar, I can find no better way of describing it, and very soon we saw the top of a large ash growing in the hedge absolutely black with starlings.

We stopped for a while to listen and it was a wonderful experience. One's ear strove to separate the notes and in a measure I was successful. I could hear one bird mimicking a partridge, another a tit, yet another was bleating like a sheep.

Not long ago there used to be a shepherd near my home who called his sheep with a peculiar whistle and this sound was familiar to the starlings. They soon picked it up and I used to hear them giving an exact imitation as they sat on the chimney pots of the stables.

All of a sudden the sound was turned off as if by a tap. The silence, coming in an instant, was uncanny, and not a bird moved. Looking upwards, we could see them all sitting as if carved in

stone. From a distant village I could hear the voices of children freed from school, and far away a man was calling his cattle. Then first one and then another began to sing again, hesitatingly, and soon others joined until the clashing wave of sound filled the ears, blocking out all other sounds. Again came the silence. Then my horse, chilled with standing, shook himself violently, rattling and clinking his bit. And then the starlings seemed for the first time to be aware of our presence; they left the tree in a rush of wings, carpeting the sky in a mass of black specks, now appearing small as pin points, then, as they wheeled and one could see the outspread wings, the moving host seemed more solid. They descended in a wave on the field and at once began to feed. I looked up at the bare branches overhead and one solitary starling remained, a bird of character evidently. He soon began to sing all by himself, waving his wings to help his song and opening his beak wide.

The starling is a plebeian bird, but a merry soul, and in his memory he stores all the country sounds for future use; he delights in the countryside, so it is good of him to come to London, as he does, to bring those country sounds with him. Next time you hear the starlings at roosting time as they flock and crowd the ledges of some of the London buildings, listen with care if you are a country lover, for they are bringing the voice of the green fields and woods to you, and it is a faithful reproduction.

So then at last we went on down the lanes, where the puddles were reflecting the soft dove-grey sky. Westwards the sun was setting behind a solid bank of cloud, but nearly overhead there was a break. The eye travelled up through this gap in the cloud to the faint depths of misted blue beyond, and two little gold cloudlets were shining down on the glory of a sunset hidden from us here in the lane. As we went along I noticed the old birds' nests, and I could tell most of the species from the nests. Black-birds' and thrushes', set midway up the hedge, and full of red berries, some tilted on one side, the storehouses of the hedgerow

mice. Others, with moss still green and sheep's wool interwoven, told of greenfinch and hedgerparrow, and the flimsy fibrous cups of the bullfinch, defying, despite their frailty, the winter gales.

And then on past the rookery in the park, deserted and silent these winter days, well-built residences that stand from year to year and which house successive generations of rooks. Talking of rooks, it is curious how they will sometimes desert a rookery that has been in use for perhaps generations. Sometimes it means the trees are perishing, but this is not always so; and there are country legends about the subject. Some say the rooks will desert a rookery when the heir of the property is about to die, but like most of the country legends, it is of course sheer nonsense.

That sturdy labourer, the rook, is the most typical bird of the countryside. He works hard for his living, and, unlike the jackdaw, is an honest citizen, going out to his day's work in the early morning and returning at dusk, tired with his toiling in the fields.

The other day I saw a very curious rookery in a line of poplars. Usually they build in oaks and elms but these nests were built in tiers, one above the other; quite a skyscraper of rooks' nests. In one tree I counted over twenty nests, all built in the branches close to the trunk. I could not help thinking this was a very bad arrangement, for sanitary reasons, and I suppose the patriarch of the rookery had the right to the top 'flat' of all!

I know of another rookery, a very large one in Somerset, where there is a certain tree in which no rook is ever allowed to build by the rest of the community. Every year a few pairs try to build a nest but the other rooks come and thief the sticks. I was interested in this and made enquiries from the villagers. And it transpired that some years ago a man shot one of the building rooks with a rifle, from the village street.

Birds are peculiarly sensitive when they nest in colonies, and this applies to swallows as well as rooks. I remember a village boy shooting a swallow on the nest with an air gun. The nest was built in a barn where there were numbers of swallows' nests, but

next year not a bird built there, and from that day to this no other swallow has ever come to the barn.

The Old Red Hills of Galloway

The colouring of Scotland is seen best in the winter months.

When the heather flames in summertime it is lovely, 'the vacant wine-red moor' is powerfully attractive, but I prefer the russets and the greys of winter in the hills, and snowdrifts lying blue in the shadow.

This evening I was motoring through Galloway, a lesser-known Scottish county. And coming down a little road not far from Kipford I saw an unforgettable scene.

The sun was setting on my left and the whole of the western sky was glowing like a foundry. Gold cloudlets were combed out against a background of rare blue-green and a whole sheaf of rose-coloured wisps were spread in a fan across the sky.

To my right was a little mere surrounded on all sides by birches and firs, all wrapt in the deepest shadow, and beyond, across the water, rose a line of bare hills studded with little knolls and grey rocks—a typical feature of the Galloway country. But it was that line of hills that was so magical. It seemed as if they were lit from within with a wonderful rose-red glow. It may have been the dead bracken and ling, or the red-barked birch thickets that were scattered about the hillsides that heightened the effect.

But this wonderful colour was reflected in a much lower key in the shadowed mere of the foreground. Clusters of purplish willows grew close to the water, and seven coots swam placidly across.

I have noticed before this colour of Scotland, just at sundown. One sees the same thing greatly magnified, on a grander and more obvious scale, in Switzerland. But this phenomenon was infinitely more subtle and lovely. Slowly the colour faded off the hills, those bird-enchanted hills, and very soon it had gone completely, leaving a monochrome of blue and grey. It seemed that

within the bracken covered steeps a hidden fire had died to ash, leaving a cold deserted hearth.

Then across the loch came a paw of wind, ruffling greyly the surface of the water and talking in low tones among the withered reeds. The coots swam away, each with a spear of silver in its wake, and I continued on my journey.

When I reached Kipford I heard the cry of wild geese, and saw a skein of seven or eight grey lags coming down from the hills. They passed over the bay and came down on the sands far out. Greylags will travel some way to their feeding grounds, thirty or forty miles is nothing to their great wings.

They are fairly common on the Solway but I have never seen them in large skeins such as one sees in Perthshire. In October, when they first arrive, a man could fill a cartload, in the fowler's phraseology, for they are as easy to shoot then as caribou on migration. But at about this time of year they find feed out in the rivers, and though a few will frequent the fields about midday, they keep to the open muds and come in to the reeds at night to feed. They seem to feed on the roots of a certain reed—black knobby rootlets that appear rather like potatoes. And the only way to get the geese is at the full moon, by lying in wait in the reeds until they come in.

I have decoyed geese on the fields in the Tay district by setting up stuffed geese on their feeding grounds and ambushing in a hide against the nearest fence. But the geese soon get suspicious, and though this method is deadly early in the season, by the time the new year is in they become exceedingly wary and take a deal of shooting.

Solway Starlight

It has been a week of rain and wind and storm, of fruitless days, when all we saw of the bernicle geese was a line of straggling forms going up the coast, hidden ever and again by the white spray of tossing waves.

At nights the moon has been almost extinguished by flying



'Took us away at a rattling pace'



clouds, and hopes of shooting by it were dashed. Indeed, so dark was it that we walked right on to a group of greylags sitting on the merse; the labrador ran right in amongst them and tried to collar one by the tail. A wild fusillade of shots went off from our three guns, but they vanished into the blackness, cackling hoarsely. On those nights it was difficult to keep one's bearings, and, to make matters worse, icy rainstorms made things unpleasant.

And to tell the truth, I was tired out with the whole business; not any less keen, for that a true fowler can ever be, but just tired out physically. F—— was in even worse case, because the morning after we arrived he stalked a greylag sitting on the open merse, and though he got his goose, the long stalk, nearly a quarter of a mile crawl, had strained his stomach muscles so that he could hardly move.

The night of the 7th, F—— and I sat before the fire in the hotel listening to the wind as it smote the four walls. The sound was quite terrifying, and I sometimes thought the chimney would come down or that the house would never stand up to it. And when I went to the window and looked out it was even more awe-inspiring still. The broad estuary was flooding on to the roadway in front of the hotel, a grey sheet of angry curling waters whipped into a white smother by the wind. In the fitful moonlight it was a grand sight, and beyond the river I could see the dark bulk of the hills looming up in the windy darkness.

My mind flew to bernicle grounds five miles distant, and I pictured the whole grand army sheltering on the high merse behind the long bank. As I thought of it the more certain was I that they would be there, and at last I broached the matter to F——. But his stomach muscles decided him, and as for me I could not face that dreadful night alone in such a desolate place, so we turned in.

Next morning the roadway was strewn with wreckage, and poor old Robin's boat was gone. I found the old man standing outside the inn surrounded by sympathetic rustics, their sympathy tempered by a certain righteous wisdom that they had fore-

seen the rising of the waters and pulled their boats right up against the village wall. But for Robin it must have been a serious loss, as boats are expensive things, and he relied on his for a livelihood.

But neighbouring farmers were in even worse plight, for when we went up to the Point, the edge of the merse was strewn with the carcasses of the drowned sheep that had been caught by the wind-backed tide during the night. Sutherland, our guide, stopped by one of these pitiful carcasses and pointed to its protruding eyes, from which the terror had not even departed in death. 'If ye had gone last nicht that's how we should hae found ye!' And there was a grain of truth in his words, for had we been on the Point we should surely have been cut off by the rising water, and nothing could have saved us.

F—— was to depart that day, though I was staying two more days before going south. The wild weather seemed to have taken itself off, and a spell of frost set in. Of the bernicles we saw no sign, and F—— departed that evening in a disgruntled mood. I had never shot a bernicle, though this was not from want of trying, but I hoped my luck had changed. Frost meant a clear moon and calm nights.

That evening I took a stroll along the bank to watch the sunset. It was wonderful, a sort of rosy mistiness about it that foretold settled frost. Curlew were coming from the fields in neat formations, and as it grew darker a long skein of greylags came down off the hills and went out to the big sandbanks. I saw them land, and through my glass I could see them shaking their feathers and preening happily before settling down for the night. In the hollows of the pasture ice cracked, and the mysterious evening seemed fraught with pending adventure and romance. Perhaps it is only when we are young that we get this idea, but the far hills appeared so frosty and blue, and the air drew so keen to the lungs, it somehow excited me.

I had a good dinner that night, for I had a long vigil before me, and it seemed well to fortify myself against the cold. At 9.30 I

went out into the inn yard and looked at the night. The moon was just beginning to glow over the rim of the moor behind, but there was not yet enough light to shoot by. But it promised to be a perfect night, not the suggestion of a breeze, and a few light clouds sailing over from north-west.

Half an hour later I was rugging up my car in the farmyard. A yellow glow behind an upper window suggested that the farmer's family was retiring for the night. On the roofs of the barns and outhouses the moon cast a bright glitter, and the ice in the car ruts also twinkled in the moonshine. Soon all links with humankind were left behind, and I emerged on to the merse itself. There appeared a beauty beyond description, for the wide sea was a sheet of twinkling light that seemed like a lake of liquid silver, while away to the north dark hills stood in clear-cut silhouette. I stood behind a slight swelling in the ground, listening. At first a complete silence seemed to surround and overwhelm me. It was as if I stood in a vast shadowy room with the ceiling pricked and studded with millions of star pin-points. And then, when I held my breath, I began to hear tiny sounds from the estuary—thin piping cries, with now and then the deep croak of the shelduck. It must have been quite five minutes before I made a move, and then I became aware of the bitter cold. I had been quite hot from my tramp from the farm, but of a sudden I felt my clothes hanging chill and cold about my back and shoulders. So I started across the merse towards the sea. I was rather vague in my mind as to what I should do—whether to go on down coast to the bernicle grounds, or go straight out to the shore and spend the first part of the night in a hide I had built against the low bank. Anyway, I had the whole night before me, and there was time to do both. Half-way across the merse a sound made me drop in my tracks. From the north I heard a babel of elfin yaps, like a pack of Peke pups giving tongue. It was the bernicles right enough, but what were they doing up the coast so far from their recognized feeding-grounds? Then I realized that my chances of at last bagging a bernicle seemed good; this was evidently one of those

rare nights when they move from place to place, up and down the shore. They will do this under the moon, especially after rough weather—possibly it is a form of exercise, for the main pack had been stormbound for the last four days or so.

From the sound it seemed that the whole pack was on wing towards me, but I soon realized that there were two parties. One passed down the sands about half a mile away making for the Point, and the other was heading in my direction. Gradually the sounds grew louder, and then I saw a large pack passing down the merse about one hundred yards to my left. My straining gaze could hardly pick them out. Fainter and fainter became their yelping chorus as they went away towards the Point, and at last all was again silent. After waiting for some time I went on across the merse until I reached the sea's edge, and here I sat down on the bank and debated what I should do. Other parties of bernicle might be coming down from the river, and the greylags were moving too, for now and then I heard their hoarse voices calling one to the other over the flats. The tide was dropping rapidly, and as it receded, knot began to flight up from the point and scatter over the shining muds. I could see them quite clearly when they ran, mouse-like, across the path of moonlight, and after a while some widgeon came in and settled far out. The populace of this magic world was wide awake, there was no thought of sleep. It was dinner-time.

From time to time there was a curious rushing sound as a large flock of waders flew past down the tide, and across the moonlit path a stream of specks sped by. It was a wonderful experience for any man, in this lonely place so far removed from the world of everyday things, to watch and listen to all that was going on. Now and again the silver light would grow dim as clouds passed over the face of the moon, and the same shadows would glide smoothly and slowly across the sand wastes with a sort of calm dignity. Man seemed of very little account in this scheme of things. Gradually the far hills became obscure, and clouds of a ghostly woolly whiteness came crowding up from the north.

The spaces between the clouds seemed of deepest black, the same intensity of dark one sometimes sees in great depths of water. And in those yawning spaces tiny stars twinkled, which seemed to increase the idea of depth still further.

I looked at my watch and had to peer closely to see the time. It was just after midnight, and the bernicles seemed to have all gone down to the Point.

I was about to move when I heard the unmistakable sound of several calling together up above me, and in a few moments I knew that a considerable flock were coming my way. I got under the bank, and at that moment the moon slid from behind the clouds and flooded the whole scene. There was a confused view of flying forms close to me, and I fired both barrels. Not a bird dropped, and I could have kicked myself. But at the report of the gun pandemonium broke loose, curlews screamed out on the sands, and two black-backed gulls came croaking and barking over.

There followed a long spell of waiting, and the moon, as if tired of waiting too, buried itself in more filmy clouds.

The 'bernies' were evidently on the move, and I still stood a chance before dawn. The cold was intense now, and I had to walk up and down to keep warm. At about three o'clock five greylags passed up the sands just out of range, and a moment later, three more closer in. These I fired at but did no damage. Then I again heard the sound of a bernicle goose coming down from the river mouth, and it seemed to be coming on the same line as the others had taken. In a few moments I made out the dark shape passing over my head, and I fired. Immediately there was a loud thud, and I jumped out of the turf hide on to the merse.

The first thing I saw was the vivid white of its breast shining in the moonlight, and I knew I had at last shot my first bernicle goose. It was a great moment, and I was exultant.

Of all the wild geese, the bernicle is the most beautifully marked, though it is more like a duck than a goose.

The moon was now lowering, and in a short while it would be

hidden. I gathered up my belongings and walked down towards the point, and after about half an hour I heard the bernicle feeding just over the edge of the merse.

Guided by the sound I approached with caution, crawling over the frozen ground on all fours. Soon I could hear the wheezing coo of the feeding geese, and though they must have been within range of my gun, I could not see them, because the foreshore was strewn with lumps of wrack and tumbled turves fretted out by the tides.

Suddenly they all rose with a most alarming clamour, and though I fired both barrels into the retreating mob I failed to register a hit. For a long time I stood listening to the pack as it went out towards the high sands, and bit by bit the sound died away altogether.

The stars shone on and the moon slid lower in the west. My watch showed five o'clock, and so I turned for home at last, my long vigil over, and a most memorable night experienced. To be alone in the wild places on such a night is a revelation; one finds a world of magic and mystery such as one associates only with dreams.

Bernicle Hunt

I had an interesting experience last night. With my old fowler as guide, we went out under the moon after the bernicle geese. We walked about three miles in our heavy gear and arrived at the merse at 11.35 p.m. For a while we stood listening for the geese, and eventually heard them about half a mile off.

We walked towards the sound for some time until it became fairly loud. Then we took to hands and knees and finally stomach-crawled. The frost thickly rimed the herbage on the merse and in a short time our hands were frozen stiff. Nearer came the sound until I could hear the cooing undertones of the geese.

The stalk had taken quite an hour and we were both very cold. I looked at my watch and found it was nearly 3.30. The moon shone down and glistened on the marsh herbage and along our

guns. The flock—the main bernicle army—appeared to be just over the merse edge and it seemed to me that they were feeding away from us. I counselled J—— to crawl back and head them off.

Hardly had he begun his journey, however, when there was a great roar. The whole pack was up, baying to the moon. J—— growled, 'Let goo, Sirr; let goo!' and four shots rang out. But no bird fell, and we stood listening to the geese go out across the bay until the sounds died away.

The moon was sliding down towards the mountains, and the sky was dusted with frosty stars. J—— stood looking and listening, his shadow black in the moonlight behind him. 'They'll be awa to the river mooth nae doot, and will no feed the night again.'

Greylag Stalk

After noticing a large flock of greylag geese come in from the firth and pitch on a grass field adjoining the moss, T—— and I found the farmer on whose land they had alighted and got permission to try for them on the following day. Accordingly, next day T—— and I arrived at the field with eight-bores and a supply of shells.

When we reached the field about midday, we could see no sign of the greylags. There was, however, plenty of time for them to put in an appearance and we decided to separate, T—— going over the fields to the left, and I to the right, on the chance of coming on the geese feeding in some low-lying pastures behind the Moss. We therefore parted and I continued my way across the clover fields.

It was a beautiful afternoon and not too cold, with a stiff breeze from the S.E. I had not gone many yards down the side of a ditch when I heard the well-known cry of the wild geese coming in from the firth.

Peeping through the roots of the hedge I could see a line of greylag geese circling the moss preparatory to alighting. This they presently did close to a small grove of birches, but almost at once rose again and alighted on a long green ridge about a mile

away. After looking about and taking careful stock of their surroundings, they began to feed over the ridge, and were soon lost to view; all except two sentries which still remained on the ridge keeping a strict watch. Luckily there was a deep ditch on my right, perfectly dry and half full of dead leaves. Up this I ran in a bending position until I got within a hundred odd yards of the geese. Here I had to pass a gap where there was no cover and I had to 'belly-crawl' for the next twenty yards or so until I reached another high bank that adjoined the field. On top of the bank was a wooden fence and some long yellow grass which afforded excellent cover. I could hear the geese chattering and talking just over the rise and I was very excited at the prospect of a 'heavy' shot. Slowly I wormed my way up until I could command the field and a wonderful sight met my gaze. The green field was covered with geese, the nearest being about thirty yards away. Some were actually asleep in the sun with bills tucked in, and plover ran about between their ranks looking absurdly small in comparison. I edged the single barrel eight on to the wire and took aim at the nearest goose, which had his back towards me but head raised. His quick eye caught the movement up the bank and he left the ground. But at that instant I fired, bringing him down again on his side. There was a roar of wings and the whole company rose into the air, and to my utter dismay my goose did likewise, after a struggle on the ground; and not having a double gun I could not reload in time. He followed after the others and drew away.

Mournfully I climbed the fence and walked over to where they had been feeding. The ground was littered with droppings and scraps of down and where I had hit the goose a grey quill fluttered in the wind. Away to the west the geese were climbing into the sky like a line of black flies and soon they were lost against the blue of far Skiddaw.

T— now joined me, having heard my shot, and we made our way sorrowfully homewards, vowing vengeance on the morrow.

Daybreak found us again at the field, but no geese appeared either on the fields or on the Moss.

However, after we had sat under the hedge some little time, my ear caught the sound of a single goose calling over the Moss, and we saw a small party coming towards us flying very low. These birds pitched in a little field surrounded by a beech hedge not more than a hundred yards away and we immediately started to stalk them. However, it was not to be. Through the scanty rusty leaves they caught sight of T——, who was not flat enough to the ground, and they all rose at once. We ran in but they were out of range.

Lindisfarne Moonlight

I arrived at my fowling quarters here yesterday. From this old mill house, which is situated right on the verge of the slob lands opposite Lindisfarne, Sir Ralph Payne Gallwey shot for many years. In some respects the quarters are ideal for me, indeed they might be termed luxurious; hot baths and indoor sanitation do not figure largely in the usual fowling accommodation to which I am accustomed.

Last night, after a beautifully bright day with hard frost, I went out soon after eight o'clock and walked up the coast towards Bamburgh. It was a lovely night with a full moon, though the sky was rather too clear for shooting. At times, however, the moon was partly covered by light fleecy clouds.

All the sea wrack and widgeon grass thrown up on the foreshore winked and twinkled like a million jewels whenever the moon showed its face, and so still was the night that I could hear the low voice of the surf breaking on the shore beyond Lindisfarne, and now and again a single goose called out on the muds.

Very soon I saw a small party of birds swimming on a moonlit stretch of water not far from the shore, and they looked to me very like teal. I therefore stalked them to within eighty yards and gave them both barrels as they began to bunch preparatory to taking flight. I found they were knot—I killed three—and as I had

never tasted this little plump bird I brought them home to the mill.

As the double report went rolling over the flats I heard several mallard rise out of the bed of a little burn about a hundred yards to my left, and a second later a whispering sound above me caused me to look up. Against the stars I made out the dim shapes of seven duck, and on the instant I fired, bringing one down with a loud thud farther up the shore. I found it to be a fine mallard drake in perfect plumage and one of the biggest I have ever shot. After this I stood for some time in the shadow of the sea wall, listening to the sounds of the fowl out in the bay.

Sometimes a whistling passed overhead, but as the sky was so clear, I could see nothing but a shadow flick for a moment against the starlit immensity behind. Then there was a sudden rush of wings on my left and three widgeon flashed over the bank and landed in the bed of a burn out on the slake, where for a long while I could hear them whistling to one another as they fed. The moon now rode clear of all cloud and revealed the bay in clear detail, even to the beacons on the end of the Ross links. It was obviously no use staying any longer, and as the time was well past one in the morning I made my way back along the shore.

I had nearly reached the mill when a curious incident occurred. I suddenly heard the cry of the grey geese coming from over the high bank on my left. In a flash I scrambled up the steep bank and gained the top. I stood listening intently and was beginning to think I had imagined the whole thing when I heard the sound again, coming from the direction of a large root field on my right. After that I heard no more, but went home feeling quite sure that some wild geese were in the habit of feeding close to the mill during the dark hours.

This morning, when walking up the shore at the same spot, I heard the sound again. I looked over the fence and saw a farm in the distance and a large flock of white domestic geese feeding in a field just below. The brent geese get no peace in the bay here. To-day I watched a skein come in from the open sea and pitch on

the slake. A moment later a gunning punt came slipping out from Holy Island and fired at them, killing five and wounding two more, which flew off down the coast.

The Ross Farm Stalk

Capt. K—— and I walked round the shore to the beacons. A bright warm day and scarcely a breath of wind. All the Brent seem to have left the bay, and I think this is due to the warm weather.

As we were coming home there was a fine sunset behind the Cheviots and we stopped to watch it. We were standing on the shore when I saw seven wild swans coming from a northerly direction, and flying rather low. I had my eight-bore with me and we ran as hard as we could down the sands to try and intercept them. They passed over the links however, about a hundred yards off, and appeared to alight in Budle Bay. But as it was now becoming dark we decided it was too late to go after them, and we had already tramped a good many miles, so we were pretty beat.

There were several porpoises disporting in the breakers of the open sea, and earlier in the afternoon I nearly got a shot at some Golden Eye which were swimming just off shore.

This evening the weather turned much colder and a frost has set in. The loose sand on the dunes, usually so soft under foot, was frozen hard so that we could walk without even making an indentation. Looking back towards Bamburgh the air was misty with the hanging spray of the breakers and it looked like a faery castle rising above the clouds. Close to the mill we stumbled on a large salmon lying well up the shore. . . .

Last night we were shooting wild geese by moonlight, at the Beacons. We arrived at about six o'clock, by which time the moon was well up and riding in a clear sky. As soon as we reached the point I heard the geese calling to one another from the meadows on the left, and from the sounds it appeared as if there were several parties on the move.

I got down by the stake nets and T—— went up the sands a little way. It was a perfect night, very frosty and without a breath of wind. After a while I heard some geese coming in from the bay and they appeared to be coming dead over for where we were. Presently a skein actually passed us very close, but owing to the bright moonlit sky and glittering stars neither T—— nor I could see a thing. From the sounds they appeared to be within easy range.

We stayed out until three o'clock without getting a shot and then went home to bed. On the fields behind the fisherman's house there must have been a good many gaggles, for we heard them cackling one to the other but could not locate them, though it was as light as day.

Capt. K—— and I had a great day last week after geese near Ross. We arrived at the links soon after ten and immediately got our glasses out to scan the grass meadows that lie between the links and Budle Bay. Nothing in the shape of a goose was seen, however, and we therefore decided to walk up the ditches for snipe.

Near the Marsh Farm several snipe rose from a little smelly drain close to a hedge and one fell to my right barrel, number 8 shot. Passing on towards the bay we missed a great many shots out of the numerous little boggy pools that abound amongst the heather. I soon spotted through the binoculars two teal swimming in a little mere close to the bay itself and I essayed a muddy stalk by the sea wall while K—— walked round. The two birds then rose and came directly for me. The wind was fairly high and this caused them to tower up, offering a very difficult shot. The drake was leading and at him I fired, hitting him very hard and causing him to fall about a quarter of a mile away. We walked across to find him, but when we were about thirty yards from the place where he landed he suddenly rose again and flew strongly off, to fall in a large field some distance away. Here we hunted for a long while but could find no trace whatever, and we eventually had to give up the search.

It was now midday and we sat down to have our lunch under the shadow of the sea bank, out of the wind. We had scarcely begun our meal when I noticed a skein of geese coming in from the sea at a great height. Quickly we took cover in some reeds and got our glasses out to watch them, for from the way they were behaving it appeared that they were going to settle on some of the flat fields in front of us.

After wheeling about several times, and making a great deal of noise, they skimmed lower and lower, and eventually lit on the corner of a green field not far below Ross Farm.

From their position they appeared to be unapproachable, and for a long time we simply watched them through our glasses as they stalked about the field cropping the green grass. At last I thought that I might at least try a stalk and therefore I made preparations at once, rolling up my trousers and divesting myself of all unnecessary gear.

For the first hundred yards or so I simply had to walk, scarcely bending my head, for the geese were hidden from me by a slight rise in the ground. After advancing some considerable distance in their direction I came upon a deep ditch with steep sides, so sheer that it necessitated wading in the water itself. Off came my shoes and socks, and I began wading up the muddy and evil smelling ditch. I found an iron pipe running down the centre on which I was obliged to progress in the manner of a tight-rope walker, else I should have slipped down into four feet of sewage. As the day was by no means warm, my feet soon had no feeling in them; nevertheless, I somehow managed to reach the top of the drain and crawl under the wire.

I now found myself in a flat grass meadow about one hundred yards from the geese, which were still busily feeding, all unsuspecting, in the adjoining field. From my position I could just see the top of the sentry's head, though I was lying quite flat on the ground. I was therefore unable to raise my head even the slightest degree or the geese would have seen me and taken alarm. I now had to pass over the angle of the field where there was not

the slightest vestige of cover beyond a few tufts of withered grass. On the far side was a slight ditch crowned by two or three scrubby thorn trees and I knew that once I could get down into this hollow I should have the geese at my mercy, for they were not more than forty yards on the other side of the fence.

Accordingly I began to worm my way across, flat on my face, pulling myself slowly along by my hands. When I was about half-way, I glanced up and saw that all the geese had ceased to feed and were looking intently in my direction. For some moments I lay without moving a muscle and the geese did likewise. Then my ear caught the sound of distant creaking coming from across the field behind me, and on cautiously looking round I saw to my disgust that a man with a manure cart was coming towards me, followed by a string of black Angus cattle. I had to lie where I was until the cart had passed behind me through a gateway.

All this time the geese had been watching the cart closely, but realizing that it meant them no harm they did not take flight but contented themselves with keeping a watchful eye on the suspicious object. This contretemps proved a blessing in disguise for the geese were so intent on the cart they took no notice of me as I wormed my way rapidly over the brow of the rise and gained the ditch. This I found half-full of water, but there was nothing for it but to lie half in and half out of the puddle. For some time I did not dare to look over the edge of the ditch but contented myself with having a breather after my stalk, which had taken the best part of an hour. At length I cautiously raised myself on my elbows and poked the gun barrels through the fence. When I had raised myself so that I could see over I was disappointed to find that the geese had scented danger and were quickly walking away, turning their long necks and looking in my direction. I therefore waited where I was, hoping that K—— would see how matters stood and that he would try to drive the geese over me.

After a while the birds ceased to walk away, and after a long and close study of my position, they recommenced feeding,

leaving one or two birds to mount guard. K——, seeing from afar how things were, then began a wide detour over the neighbouring field. The geese soon ceased to feed and turned their attention to this new danger that threatened them on their flank; all heads were raised and they ran together and stood for some time while K—— slowly approached. Then, all at once, they took wing, and with a great cackling flew up wind past my hiding place well out of range. They did not go very far, but landed in a little green meadow about a mile away in which was a haystack.

I now had to get some circulation back into my legs, which had long since lost all feeling, so I ran about the field and executed a sort of war dance until the circulation returned.

The time was now about three in the afternoon and very soon the light would be beginning to fade, so that there was no time to be lost if I was to get one of the geese. Very soon I had started on my way again, crawling under fences and scrambling over dykes until I reached the field where they were. The field was very low-lying and wet, but I was by now pretty well soaked to the waist, so that a little extra wet would not be noticed, and I began to crawl along on all fours towards the stack. Before very long I heard a blowing and snuffling behind me and on turning round found a lot of calves following me, in a long string. Fortunately there was a wire fence within a few yards of me and through this I managed to worm my way, and the cattle were left blowing on the other side.

The geese had all this time been peacefully cropping the grass the other side of the stack, and I got up without much trouble. But again, on peeping round I found to my chagrin that they were out of range, and were feeding slowly away from me towards a little hedge. There was nothing for it but to lie where I was and to hope that K—— would again see how things stood and come to the rescue. Soon the geese became restive and a few minutes later I saw K—— walking along the plough opposite us to make a wide detour. The geese soon ran together, and after a little hesitation, running first one way and then another, they all took

off and came directly for the stack. My heart beat fast, as I felt sure of a shot, but the wily birds turned at the last moment and passed a long gunshot off to the right. I ran out from behind the stack and emptied both barrels of my magnum at the leading gander, but never cut a feather, and the geese passed over the distant hedge, climbing all the while, and dwindled into the dusk over the bay. For a long while we could hear them calling to one another as they flew out over the sea.

So ended a most enjoyable day after the finest game the fowler could wish for.

A Goose from Budle Bay

The last shot has been fired and the 8-bore has been returned to its case, likewise the magnum 12. So it is with a somewhat heavy heart that I enter up my journal this clear, cold January night within sound of widgeon feeding just outside my window. Peeping through the curtains, I can see the slob lands bathed in greenish moonshine, while ever and anon a light winks to the south, away towards Bamburgh.

Friday was a complete blank, though we tramped many miles and waited at dawn and night for a shot at widgeon. Things looked black and the chances of my bagging a goose very far away indeed. Saturday the 12th dawned bright and frosty, and we started off in high spirits. We were to shoot over some land close to Fenham flats, by very kind permission of the owner—land on which last year I stalked the grey geese with ill success. Ice crackled underfoot and it was bitterly cold. It was good to walk the same marshes, to tramp the same dunes and same familiar fields.

Some snipe and golden plover soon were in the bag; both my friend and I were shooting well. A hare was missed, however, at easy range and put the necessary damper on high spirits. Then I saw fifteen geese in the middle of a green meadow. They seemed undisturbed by our shooting and were grazing peacefully. I gave my friend the 8-bore and instructed him where to go and, as

he is an expert stalker, I knew that I had no fear of his not being in his appointed place when I rose the geese. Then I started on a long detour round the farm to get behind the birds. I took with me my magnum and two cartridges of BB, but it was merely a matter of form, because I stood no chance of a shot myself.

Giving my friend half an hour to get into position I topped the rise and saw—no geese! Only a few peewits running between the tussocks. I walked down the hill and across the level field and saw goose droppings and odd feathers all over the place, which showed that the geese were in the habit of frequenting this particular meadow.

Suddenly I heard a shot and saw my friend pick up a golden plover. He had laid down the 8-bore and fired with his 12. At the report a skein of geese rose from Budle Bay and, after a short circle, turned and headed for the field where I was standing. They came in formation, with slow, flagging flight at about 80 yards up. I curled up where I was and my khaki overcoat must have blended well with the ground, for they held their course directly for me. When about 50 yards distant, three separated, having apparently spied me, and wheeled away, but the remainder came directly over me. I stood up and fired a rather hasty shot and missed; steadying up, I fired a careful shot with the left barrel at the next in line and had the satisfaction of seeing him stagger and fall. He hit the ground a great bang about 30 yards away, and so the object of my journey was achieved. I ran forward and picked him up, then stood awhile to watch the rest of the skein.

At my double shots they had risen, with swift and hurried wing beats, climbing at an astonishing speed for such large birds, and were heading out to seawards the way they had come.

After my first shot there came a fleeting feeling of bitter disappointment, but half a second later the realization that I had actually downed my goose made me jubilant. How is it that so wary a bird had failed to see me? You must remember there was no cover whatever and I was not hidden from them by a fold in the ground.

I remember the same thing happening on the Wash, some years ago.

On the morning flight I was out on the muds with a fowler and a party of eight geese came in late, from the sea. We were absolutely without any cover, for the nearest gully was twenty yards away, so we lay down on the sand, close together, and kept quite still. The geese held their course and came directly overhead and we rose to our feet and fired. I missed my bird, but the old fowler got his, and dropped it almost on my head. Six pounds of goose, falling from over a hundred feet, might easily break a man's neck.

I slung my goose over my shoulder and went back to join Phayre, and with great pride shewed him my Pink foot.

He was as fine a goose as I have yet shot, weighing nearly 7 lb. I afterwards found I had killed him with a No. 4. Later on we killed two hares, a few snipe, and to-night, with one shot from the 8-bore loaded with BB shot, I killed 21 knot at 80 yards. Total bag for ten days' fowling: 21 knot, 2 hares, 9 curlew, 6 'shank, 5 snipe, 3 partridges, 1 goose, 2 golden plover, and 2 mallard.



Chapter the Third

Anticipation

I write this on the eve of my departure to the East Coast fowling grounds. The weather is at last colder; can it be that my luck will hold and that frost is on the way?

A quick walk round this afternoon provided a most enjoyable time. The more seasonable snap in the air and my impending foray after the geese seemed to give a new zest to everything, and I felt that I should shoot well.

Leaving my car inside the gate, I crossed the main road and started to walk down the gently sloping ground towards the river. These particular fields are usually very bare of game, but a farmer friend asked me to take a walk round, and this I was very glad to do. I like shooting over strange fields, as one never knows what one will find. Not far away I saw a tall, ragged hedge of what the country people call 'peggles', and on these berries a large number of heavy grey 'woodies' were having the time of their lives.

To approach them appeared hopeless, and I was just debating on what course to take when a providential motor lorry back-fired on the road and set them all on wing towards me. A low grey stone wall ran up a hedge close by and I ran under cover, calling the spaniel to heel as I did so. Several birds passed over my head rather high, but I picked a bird that was going away from me high up and on the right; a shot I have a particular liking for. I fired and saw him slump to the greensward beneath, 'dead in the air'.

A little boggy spring which sometimes provides a snipe in frosty weather was next approached with caution, but I found

the drain had been opened out since last I was here, and the marshy ground was quite dry.

There was a single rabbit in thick cover not far away, and after a lot of trouble and a great deal of hard work on the part of the spaniel, he broke cover at eighty yards and my one shot from the choke hit him very hard, but failed to stop him. The spaniel was after him, however, and a minute later I heard a short squeal and then silence, by which signs I knew that Sport had run into his quarry.

With two shots to my credit, I continued my way, bearing right-handed towards the hill that hides Hieaway, and as evening drew on, many straggling lines of pigeon could be seen heading for the wood.

The sun, which all the afternoon had been shining in genial but seasonable fashion, suddenly went behind low clouds massing up for sunset. And then, like a good omen, I beheld a lovely thing. High up against the dying flecks of cold green cloudlets in the west two long teams of mallard passed, all in formation and with swift, urgent flight. They were heading north, and evidently on passage. I stood spellbound until they were lost against the soft clouds, and all of a sudden I seemed to catch the low pulse of the sea and sniff the scents of coastwise lands.

Dawn Flight

We awoke this morning to find a roaring gale from the west. I saw that the mushroom of opportunity must be plucked, so after a hasty meal and a spot of whisky to keep out the cold, P—— and I set off in the dark for the bank. When we arrived, other gunners were already disembarking from cars. We therefore wasted no time in getting to our places, P—— going off into the darkness on my left, and I making for a gully near the huts. I had with me my magnum twelve for the curlew and duck (if any), and the big single eight.

Thus loaded it took me some time to get out to my place on the marsh, but dawn had scarcely begun to grey when I settled

down in my hide. About ten minutes later a curlew passed on my left and I dropped him cleanly. Then another came behind me and also fell. Soon after this I heard someone brushing through the lavender behind me and beheld another gunner grimly marching towards the sands. This fellow was to nearly ruin our chances at the geese later.

It now began to get light and the wind seemed to increase in fury. Out on the naked marsh there was nothing to break its force, and I could find little shelter in my gully as it was so shallow. To make matters worse, from the point of view of comfort, a stinging sleet began to fall which soon hid the sea bank from view. A few shots went off to the south; probably 'tit shooters' firing at 'shank. P—— seemed to have vanished, for I could not see his head above the surface of the marsh, but a few minutes later he fired at a curlew. This bird came on past me and I hit it with my second barrel at a very long range and dropped it. This curlew we were unable to find after the flight was over, as we had no dog with us.

Soon after half-past eight I saw the first skein of grey geese coming in from the sea. These were at first coming very low in the teeth of the gale, dead for my gully, but they towered into the wind and passed in lower down. On looking up I saw two 'tit shooters' strolling along the sands, gaping at the next skein which had already left the sea. These geese, too, went in below. I soon saw a great number of geese moving up and down the sands, not daring to face the long battle to the bank. They kept moving up and down opposite to us, flying just clear of the sands like a swarm of bees. Now and again they would alight on the sandbanks but never remained long. Obviously they were hungry and were trying to make up their minds to come in over the marshes. At last several parties came towards us and actually crossed the bank about two hundred yards to my left. Several parties were now in the air at once but none came in range of me. The time was now nearly nine o'clock. By rights all the geese should have been 'in'; but still other skeins kept appearing over the sea. I saw my last

hope lay in getting back to the bank and this I did with all dispatch, running as fast as I could in my heavy kit, and carrying two guns.

I flung myself down on the windward side of the high sea bank, where the long grass afforded good cover. The force of the wind 'hit me a kick' as the Irish say, and it was far from warm. Below me, resting on the surface of the plough, were hundreds of gulls, all facing into the wind and looking very miserable indeed. Very soon I saw another skein making their way in from the sea, and they appeared to be coming in my direction.

With thumping heart I watched them through the waving grass and saw them coming nearer and nearer. The wind kept carrying them to one side, and at one time it seemed as if I should miss my chance. But at last the leader topped the bank and I rose on one knee with the heavy 8-bore at my shoulder. There were seven in the skein, and they were passing directly overhead, in a V.

I swung the gun forward on to the third bird from the front and pressed the trigger. To my great joy I saw at once that my shot had taken effect. The goose collapsed and was dead in the air. He fell on the marsh with a great thump and I ran down the bank to pick him up. As I did so there was a loud 'dunch' on my left and I beheld to my amazement another goose lying quite dead not twenty yards from my first victim!

When I examined them I found that a lucky pellet had pierced the neck of the second bird and had literally cut its throat.

I had hardly time to pick up the two geese when I saw yet another party coming for the bank, and again I got under cover. Whether I was rattled by my last shot I know not, but my three and a half inch case cut a gap in the wings of the leading goose and failed to fell him. This was the last party that came in, and I now turned my attention to tying the geese together by the legs, for I had a long walk to the car. P—— now appeared and was amazed at my stroke of good fortune. Had he seen what was happening on the bank he would undoubtedly have come over, but though he had heard me firing he never saw any geese drop.

So ended the flight. The 'tit shooters' had nothing, not even a curlew, but they appeared to have done a considerable amount of walking and were very tired. P—— had had no shot whatever save a curlew that he missed, and was very disappointed. Had he been with me nothing could have prevented him killing a couple of geese, for they were in nice range and flying slowly owing to the gale.

Beginner's Luck

A blank flight this morning but a bit of luck for D—— this afternoon. While we were alighting from the car on the sea bank, close to the shepherds' cottage, a large bird suddenly appeared flying towards us over the fields. D—— recognized it as a goose and immediately we got down under the hedge. I had no time to put my gun together and D—— had only his sixteen-bore with him. However, he just managed to slip in two shells of number five when the goose appeared over the roof of the shepherds' cottage in front of us. It was about thirty yards up and flying away from us. D—— stood quickly up and fired one shot, which was an excellent bit of work. The goose turned a somersault in the air and fell perfectly dead on the green grass at the foot of the bank. It was a very large old gander pink foot, and on examination we found that one of its legs was badly broken by an old shot wound and much swollen. This no doubt was the reason of its flying so low. D—— was tremendously pleased as it was his first goose, and certainly he deserved it, for he has been working very hard with me all the week.

After this success we waited for the evening flight out on —— Marsh, but though hundreds of mallard went over us they were all much too high. As I stood on the marsh I could hear them passing over, but the night was so calm that they were flying far out of gunshot.

Wild Swan

Out on the morning flight. Frost has gone and a strong westerly wind arisen, which is all to the good.

P—— had his first real view of wild geese, for thousands went in over the —— Marsh to the south of us. We could see them passing in over the bank for about half an hour. We had one or two skeins over us at a very great height and I had one shot with the 8-bore and actually hit the leader pretty hard, but he went on. As a matter of fact I had no right to fire as they were far out of range. Some parties of curlew came in and I had a brace with a right and left.

The day turned out very warm and calm, and we spent the day on the marshes shooting 'shank. I was waiting quietly in a gully when a goose passed to my left, in easy range, and to my utter disgrace, I missed it!

Out again this morning on the —— Marsh where most of the geese went in yesterday, but no geese came anywhere near us. A few small parties went in over the old marsh and if we had been in our original positions we might have got some shots. Weather is very mild and open and alas! the wind has gone. Nothing on the evening flight for either of us.

We have worked very hard these last few days, rising at five-thirty, a miserable business, and staying out until it has been too dark to see.

- The last few mornings the geese have flighted in very late—generally round about 8 o'clock—and few have come in on their old line. They seem to have kept up the T—— end, and this morning, having risen earlier than usual, we motored to the T—— marsh and got out near the tide line. Dawn came and not a goose came in, though I heard several calling in the mist opposite us. I saved what would have otherwise been a perfectly blank morning by dropping a curlew at a hundred paces with the 8-bore.

This morning, while out on the marsh at dawn, three whooper swans appeared, coming in from the sea. I thought at first they would give me shot with the eight, but they passed just out of range. Their wild trumpeting cries are as impressive as the cry of the geese. The last thing I saw of them was their gleaming white

bodies, one behind the other, disappearing over the marshes to the north.

The Clamouring Skeins

Thinking the geese would be back, I went well up the coast long before dawn had fully come. It was not long before I heard the sound of the geese on the high sand. Selecting a suitable grip, I sat down and began my chilly vigil. Before very long I heard the talking of geese and saw a skein of fifteen or more birds heading directly for my gully. A strong wind from the west kept them so low that they could not have been more than thirty feet up. But the wind was my undoing. As they were almost within range a strong gust drove them aslant me, and in a moment I saw they were going to pass out of range. I rose on one knee and gave them a long case of BB, but though I hit the foremost gander, he did not come down; indeed, I doubt whether the shot penetrated his armour-plating, but feathers flew, showing a hit, and for a moment I thought he was going to drop. A long wait, in which I was torn with that miserable indecision as to whether I should move my position. The dawn was now fully come and with the light I saw the sky was striped with skeins going in a long way down the coast. I cannot pretend to guess at the numbers I saw, for fear of accusations of exaggeration, but one skein alone must have been composed of close on 800 birds. That was the only shot I had, but another duck was added to the bag on the evening flight, the 3-bore again bringing down a mallard from a great height.

Au Revoir East Coast

This is for me a sad entry, because I shall not write again from the magic land of sea lavender for many a weary month; in short, next August, if all is well. We skated along the roads in the car, once completing a superb skid on the icy road that nearly finished our fowling career for good and all. Everywhere locked in ice, the wide flat fields covered in snow and the dykes iron-bound in the grip of frost. Our mutual friend Colonel Hawker would have

rejoiced at the sight, but, knowing the habits of pink-footed anser, I was not so sure of success. Therefore, when this morning, no geese came in and not even a curlew passed over me on the morning flight, I was not surprised in the least. Hard weather may be suitable in some parts of the country, but where I go on the East Coast it is about the worst possible weather if you want geese.

To-night a great duck flight. It began at early dusk and hundreds of mallard passed over us, mostly very high. 'Belching Bess', my mighty eight, reached a high bird and tumbled him thump into a dyke with a hearty splash. Both my friends had a duck each, so we returned home happy.

A Straight Necked 'Un

Most of the best runs with hounds are after Christmas. This is because the clicketting season has started and the dog foxes travel far o' nights to pay court to their lady loves. And hounds finding him, he makes back to his own kennel by the way he knows: A fox in strange country and hard pressed is quickly at fault.

It is my belief that foxes, especially old foxes, know every earth and drain, field and spinney of their own country in an amazingly intimate way. And I doubt if a fox ever forgets; by that I mean if he has been hunted, even over a strange line of country, he would in all probability follow the same route if he was found again in the same covert.

We found a good fox in Oakshaw wood just after midday. Hunting with the dog pack we had tried the Burrôws and Bevans gorse without success, all the foxes seemed to have left the district. But the old fellow in Oakshaw made up for the blank morning and we had a run that is worth noting here.

• It was a lovely sunny afternoon as we waited down wind of the wood—Oakshaw is on the side of a hill, and of some 40 acres. I heard all the thrushes singing in the little valley, and close at hand a blackbird was warbling. From every horse and rider a shadow was thrown along the withered grass, all lit by a strong

cross light of sun. And it was not weak sunlight as of midwinter, but with a golden, almost autumn-like quality, a glaze, if you like, such as seen in old Flemish paintings. The distances were enamelled too in blue glazes, and high over Burton spire an aeroplane was stunting, like a silver insect. Now and again it would turn towards the sun and it gleamed and vanished. So still was the afternoon I could hear the sound of its engine.

Hounds found their fox in the bottom corner under the black-thorn and he went straight away down the little lane at the right-hand end, and I noticed the Master doing his best to hold back an impatient field. I do not envy a M.F.H., he must have tact and patience and a gift of leadership if he is to be successful; we are lucky in having a man in whom these qualities are well developed!

Going over some fast ground with good fences we hunted our fox into the kale behind Westone Firs and had some bother before we pushed him out, as there was another fox there which hounds unfortunately chopped. But we got away again and went right-handed over the railway. I thought he was making for Westone Park but he held straight on to Woodenbridge, giving us a gallop over rolling fields down to the brook. Here several of the field got into trouble. I saw the Major, dripping wet and hatless, trying to catch his horse—which however refused to be left behind and jumped the bullfinch beyond—and the Major remained, mouthing strange oaths, for, like most red-headed men, he is quick tempered.

Some rooks, stooping and tumbling over the plough on top of the hill, betrayed which way Charles James had gone and soon I could see the hounds melting through the quickset on the headland, with the huntsman and Master well up.

My horse is slow and I got left behind and when I got up to the plough I found the fox had gone into the fir plantations beyond the village. In the middle of the field was a team, patiently waiting for the ploughman who was standing on the top rail of the fence, looking down into the valley. Some men working on the Woodenbridge road had downed tools and were running towards

the Goat and Compass. A swarm of school children were also running in a squealing mass. One fell, with the suddenness of all small children, and his mouth opened square.

The fox went straight through the firs and park and was pulled down in the open after a hunt of two and a half hours with a seven and a half miles point. Actually we must have covered about ten miles from start to finish, a splendid run in all truth.

Now the rooks were coming home to their twiggy elm colonies, and from every copse and wood, thrushes sang of the promise of spring. From the villages blue smoke rose straight and faint, for the breeze of early day had died, and as I hacked back along the water meadows I heard a snipe drumming. Bats were abroad, hawking about under the trees and round the farms; and the sun went down over Woodenbridge park, red as a coal.

A good day, my masters, a good day!

Foxhunting Fever

It must seem very strange to some how foxhunting becomes a passion, almost an obsession, with a great number of people. From, let us say, October to March, they think of nothing else, dream of nothing else, and talk of nothing else. True, we find shooting men, fishermen and golfers affected in somewhat the same way, but not to such a great extent. Hunting men can talk for hours at a time on the subject of hounds and horses, but I have noticed they know little of the habits of the fox, his life history, and the mysteries of scent. A great number I am afraid take little interest in houndcraft, and as long as they can get a good gallop and jump a lot of timber they are satisfied. These latter folk are not the best type, and an M.F.H. has sometimes to show great patience and self-control, when hounds are hunting, in dealing with such people.

I saw an instance to-day of a man, who should have known better, heading a fox from Beddows spinney. He came across from the main road, thinking, I suppose, to take a short cut: result, hounds chopped the fox in the spinney! I was glad to see

the Master having a somewhat heated conversation with him afterwards, and I only hope the ladies were out of hearing.

There are more accidents in the hunting field than in any other form of sport, and it is this spice of real danger that gives foxhunting its only real justification. To ride straight takes a great deal of personal courage, and the knowledge that even the best riders to hounds must take their share of tosses shows that it is no game for weaklings! It would make interesting reading if we knew how many people had been killed or fatally injured in the hunting field, and then we might understand that Charles James gets his own back, and a little more, if the value we put on human life is deserved. To ride really well is a great and enviable gift and by no means easy to acquire. I do think that the hunting should be left to the hounds as much as possible, the battle of wits should be between fox and hounds.

If that were always so then foxhunting would be less cruel than shooting or fishing. These are my views, such as they are, and I think most people would agree in their heart of hearts. So many ignorant people seem to think that the fox is always killed, and it surprises many when they learn that only a small percentage get killed by the hounds. Every true huntsman is sorry when a game fox is pulled down, and the actual killing of the fox is of secondary importance. No one denies that in a civilized community, all hunting—whether shooting, fishing or foxhunting—is cruel, but man derives an enormous amount of pleasure from sports that take him into the open air. The British are perhaps more fond of the open air than any other nation, and in foxhunting one can realize to the full the joy of the countryside. On horseback a large area is covered, and one comes to understand, in a measure, the subtle charm of the fields and woods, all so personal in character and possessing attractions that are found in no other country in the world.

From Beddows spinney we went on to Shelverdene woods, where we found a good fox that took us away at a rattling pace to Old Priors, over some lovely grass and good fences. It was a

heavenly afternoon with glorious sun, and the river, flooded by the recent rains, formed a series of shining lakes all up the valley.

From Old Priors this gallant pilot took us left-handed to the railway, where a passing train saved his brush.

Galloping down the side of a tall bullfinch I noticed the way the blackbirds dart out, panic-stricken, to dive again into cover after a few yards. This habit of blackbirds is known to swift-footed village lads. One goes one side of the hedge and the other keeps opposite to him, and they run as fast as they can, shouting and throwing stones. After a while the blackbird slinks down into the hedge-bottom, gasping, and is then finished off with a well-aimed shot from a catapult. Wrens too are sometimes killed in the same fashion, but finches have more sense and fly straight away.

I do not think there is so much cruelty nowadays as formerly; village boys realize such practices are unspeakably cruel, and though most boys have a healthy love of bird-nesting, there are now other attractions, even in the country, and this is a change for the better.

Monster Pike

With a Rugby boy (School House), I went piking at S—— Park, and we had on the whole an amusing time.

It was a grey colourless day, at first very cold—it snowed last night—but towards late afternoon the weather became much milder and we could dispense with our overcoats. Now such an afternoon as this, when the temperature rises after a spell of cold, is ideal for piking, and I have noticed that they feed much better and with more 'dash' than in continued open weather.

We arrived at the lake soon after one o'clock, and it was not long before I had my line out with a fine silver roach of nearly three-quarters of a pound on the snap tackle.

On the islands, snowdrops were beginning to cluster and not a breeze ruffled the water. Green woodpeckers were busy chasing one another beside the placid lake. In the park I could see deer feeding, and the stately Queen Anne house was reflected faithfully

in the space between the two islands. All about were lovely trees—limes, willows, and elms—each tree with its beauty doubled by reflections.

For half an hour my bait cruised about, then it began to work in towards the bank, so I decided to have another cast. This was a good effort and I sent the bait out over thirty yards. In the meantime there was a minor excitement when Bartlett's float dived away with a young jack of about a pound and a half hanging grimly on to the carp which he was using as bait. This jack got off after a short tussle. And then a curious thing happened. I imagined that a great pike was slowly approaching my bait. I seemed to see the bronzed barred side of him as he glided forward towards the fish, but it was all in my imagination. Laughingly I said to Bartlett, 'There is a monster pike coming up to my bait, watch my float carefully . . . see, there it goes.' And even as I said this the white float began to slide slowly forward, not dipping down in any way, but just cruising along the surface. And then there was a swirl and it had vanished. I have never seen such a sudden and vigorous bite; the line blurred the still surface of the lake and I could see the white pilot float as a small spot far down, and sliding away.

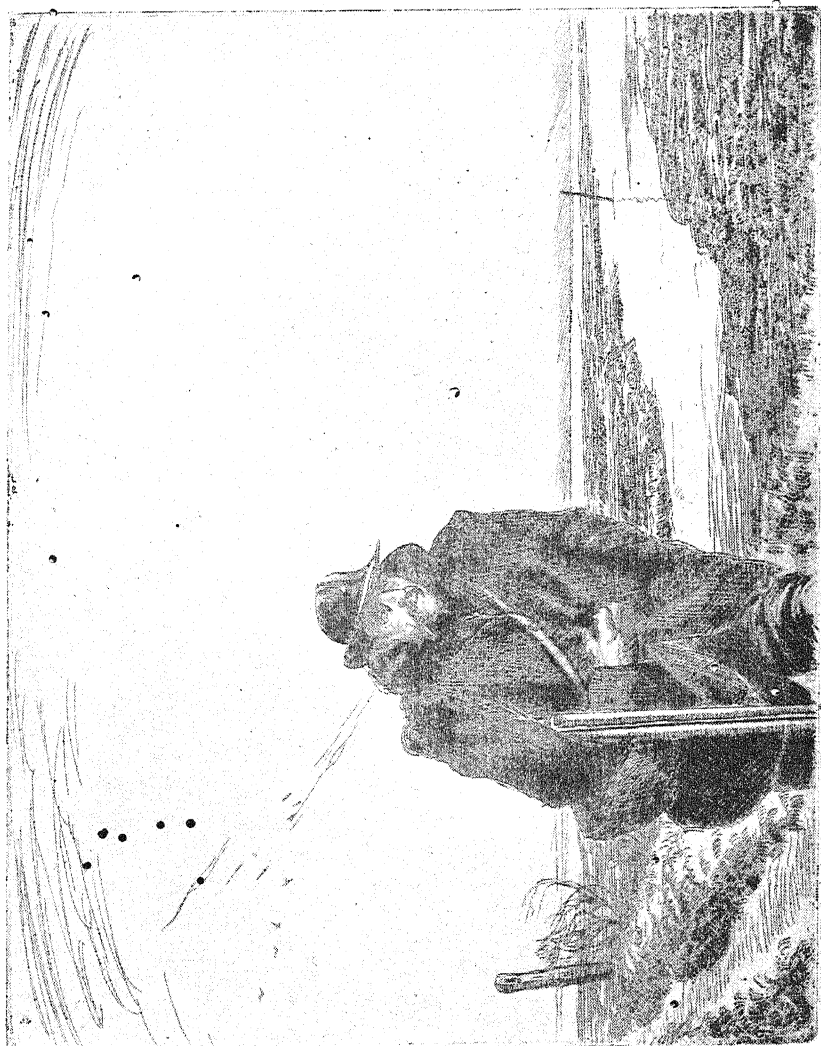
Now it is a difficult matter to know just when to strike a pike. I let this fellow have it for about forty seconds because I guessed he was a big fish. And then I reeled in the slack line and struck. I felt as though the hooks had gone home into a meal sack, and he took out a length of line with one rush. I thought I had him well hooked, and as I had a stout rod I pulled him in towards the reeds. Now and again he would give a mighty rush and take out some line, but soon I saw him ten yards out, near the surface and shaking his head from side to side, a great head like a boar's. It was the biggest pike I have ever had 'on'. I put him at fifteen pounds or so, and soon he was close over the weeds, still shaking his ugly head, trying to expel the fish. He was out of reach of the gaff and Bartlett could not reach him, and I was just putting a little more pressure upon him when I saw the silver roach expelled from his

mouth and he glided slowly away and down, broadside to us, so we could see the whole length and breadth of his bulky barred side. Of course there was nothing to be done then but wonder where I had gone wrong—I ought to have left him longer, etc., etc.

We had only six small carp left in the can but I put one of these on and threw out again in the same place. But I have never known a pike that has been played and hooked take the bait again, and I had no hope that we should see him a second time. About an hour later the float suddenly vanished and we ran down the bank. I was taking no chances this time and let him have it for over a minute, and then I struck. But it was not the same fish, as I expected, and when at last Bartlett gaffed it neatly over the weeds it proved to be a pike of about six pounds, a remarkably well-built deep fish in the pink of condition. I had one or two runs after this and landed another jack of about two pounds which we put in the little weir pool below the overflow. We nicked his tail so that we should know him again. Bartlett had several weak runs, small jack not worth bothering about, and then he went away down the lake-side, spinning, to return half an hour later with the news that a pike had taken him down the other end—he was fishing with a big spoon—and had broken him.

Now dusk was falling and the thrushes had ceased singing. Lights came out in the big house and made wavering stars in the water and so we packed up and went home. The pike were obviously in taking mood, and had we a can of good-sized roach I think we should have had a big catch. The memory of the big fellow was painful, but there it is. It is always the big ones that get away, but I knew I had lost the best pike it had ever been my lot to hook. These particular pike from S—— are excellent eating, not in the least muddy, and with fine white flesh. A pike if hung up with salt in its mouth when first caught, is very good indeed if well cooked.

The cook came running in to me only a few minutes ago with the news that the pike had come to life and was swimming about in the kitchen sink. So I had to go out and 'bean' him with a



Going out to Flight



'Not the best type'

rolling pin! It is amazing how tenacious to life pike sometimes appear to be, and carp are the same. They seem to be able to live out of the water a very long time and quickly recover if placed in water.

The small pike fight better than the big fellows, indeed the latter will sometimes come in without a struggle. A roach of about half a pound is the best bait for a really big pike; if you use smaller baits the jack will worry you continually. Carp are too dull in colour, nor are they so lively as roach, and it is my belief that big pike feed but seldom. It is amazing how these fish stalk and dash on their prey, when they rush they move so quickly the eye can scarcely follow.

Wildwood Ambush

With the ushering in of February, thoughts of general shooting are put away. There is a charm about the woods at this time of year, a sense of an awakening that is even now stirring in the sheltered places, a promise of things to come. I went this evening to Wildwood, carrying my rifle and a good supply of .22 'long'. As the object of these journeys is to kill as many of the pests as possible, I have no qualms as to how or where I take my shot, whether the target is near or far. Following the advice given me by a friend, I had a silencer fitted to the rifle, and of all forms of pigeon shooting, on a calm evening this method, in my opinion, is by far the best.

The conifers have grown since last year and in some places I could stand upright without difficulty. Bluebells were thrusting up their first green shoots through the sodden leaves and thrushes were singing far and near. It was a gentle evening with a strong hint of spring in the air, though we are yet so far away from the true spring of the year. Lambs bleating in the far distance lent colour to the passing moments, and the very earth seemed to breathe soft warm scent—of pine needles and wet dead leaves, of the rich dark earth and rotting wood, of sodden bracken and the wood's floor. After a sunny afternoon there was a gentle sunset, too; not the crisp, orange ball of fire burning between snow-clad stems of trees, but a yellow, pink-flecked sky.

As I waited for the arrival of the first birds my thoughts flew back to my wildfowling haunts; the world of bernicles and moon-lit marshes seemed years away. 'Clap!' I heard the first pigeon arrive, and, peeping through the twigs above me, I saw it sitting on a tree-top about fifty yards up the wood. I nestled the stock into my shoulder and, holding my breath, fired. Instead of the hollow 'thock' of the bullets' 'tell', I heard the clatter of departing wings. Almost at once there was a rushing sound and the whole main army passed overhead, a flock of some three hundred birds. Wheeling, they came to clapping rest in the trees above my ambush and for some minutes I was at a loss to know which target to take. One perched on too thick a branch that hid most of his ample pink breast, another had several thin twigs athwart him, another perched high on a tippity tip seemed to offer an easy shot. I took it and missed. Four times this happened, the silencer being so effective as scarcely to bother the rest of the army. Then I found my sight out of alignment. A couple of turns and I took aim again. This time came the welcome sound of a bird hard hit. The pigeon remained immovable, then heeled backwards, falling with a crash into the thickets. Seven more shots I had within the next few minutes, and every bird was down.

The Home Shoot

I managed to have a walk round a shoot on Thursday that was not far from Hieaway. It was a bitter afternoon, with every pool and ditch ice-bound. I had expected to see at least one snipe at the little boggy spring where I shot one early in the winter, but there was not one to be seen. This particular shoot is always devoid of game, and rabbits, that used to be so common, are now a rarity. Two pigeons passed over my head on their way to some stubbles, and I brought one down with a long cartridge that I had got for my Scotch fowling trip. The range was about eighty yards, and the pigeon was killed stone dead. Soon afterwards I had another, bound maybe for the same field. Then the spaniel started to bark in the thickset hedge. I hurried up and was just in time to see a

rabbit leave a long way ahead. I sent two shots after it, but the range was too great. However, I hurried on the dog and soon the rabbit broke cover behind me. I let it draw away, then fired the choke and rolled it over.

The afternoon was drawing to the long evening twilight. A huge body of pigeon passed over, bound for Hieaway, whose crest I could see from where I was standing. Despite the cold, grey evening there was a romance in the air, a promise of lambs and spring and the turn of the year. So as long as this old earth can sustain life, so this cycle will go on. Winters, however long, will give place to spring, and yet the monotony of days does not exist for the lover of the countryside. He is far, far better off than the town dweller, for he is nearer to the vital life of the earth; he is, as it were, with his finger on the pulse of Nature. Through his eyes and his ears and his nose he can sense the passage of life, the stirrings beneath the grey winter sward of the fields. Life is indeed eternal on this earth, and will go on perhaps after the earth itself has dissolved into oblivion; the seeds will doubtless be blown to other corners of the universe where they will take root and flourish.

The Red Indian (not the plains Indian who was a poor fish) felt this, and, when on the trail through the forest, he came on some awe-inspiring spectacle of Nature—a great waterfall or a long lake shining like a mirror between the dark trees—he would fall on his knees and praise the Great Spirit. And even to-day, abroad outdoors, one can sense something of the same sort of thing. Let us not forget that there is something besides bricks and mortar in the world, for there will be trees and wild creatures long after we, as a race, have vanished from the earth.

Hieaway Ambush

I walked along the steep hillside where the rabbits were feeding in hundreds, taking advantage of the quiet evening. Many sheep were dotted along the slope, with lambs gathered round them. Few animals look so maternal as an old mother sheep proud of her offspring. Tails wriggled with delight as the knock-kneed young-

sters bunted and pushed, and the air was musical with the infant cries. Away over the valley, flood water flashed vividly against the green of the water-meadows, and there was a softness in the air that told the winter was over at last. Very soon I saw the crest of Hieaway bobbing over the rise of the ground and in a few minutes I was at the hand-gate that led into the ride.

The wood seemed little changed since I was last here; a bit thinner perhaps in the undergrowth, but the place was 'alive' with thrushes' song. I opened the gate and slipped inside. Through the tangled underwood I threaded my way until I stood on the sandy mound close to my hide, or what was left of it. The winter storms had done their worst and for some minutes I laboured to repair the damage. This done, I crawled inside and slipped a bullet into the breech of my trusty carbine.

The evening was completely calm. Looking up at the high oak branches I could detect no movement whatever, and as a background, the sky was a mellow colour that was hard to define; it was neither blue, nor yellow, nor pink, but a subtle mixture of all three. The wreckage of autumn days was evident all round; skeletons of oak leaves bleached almost white with the fierce frosts. But on stirring the leaves I found wet, shiny leaves beneath of a rich mahogany colour. Far away a train passed panting up the valley; I heard it at first in the distance, then nearer and louder, then dying away. Thrush answered thrush and a black-bird warbled quietly to himself close by in the hollies.

Soon I had the feeling that the pigeon should be arriving, but the time dragged on and not a bird showed up. Yet the leaves were plentifully spattered with white all about the spot where I was hiding, and they were fresh droppings too. Then, at about five-fifteen, a party of seven passed over the tree-tops, high and circling. They appeared to be very suspicious, as though they had been shot at lately, though there were no feathers or footmarks in the soft woodland soil. At long last, three came to rest on a spindly fir a long way up the wood. So the evening passed, the light began to fail and the blackbirds to 'chink-chink' as they

busied themselves for sleep. Soon it got quite dark and I knew that the evening was to prove a blank.

A blank indeed it was as far as shooting went, but not in any other way. The glamour was still there, the firs as dark as ever and old Wol, the owl, was sitting at the mouth of the same hollow tree at the top of the ride.

The Deserted Lane

When I was a small boy one of my greatest joys was to go for long rides on a Shetland pony; Little Man I called him. And one day, meeting a farmer in one of his fields, he laughed and said, 'Hullo, where are you two going?' And we had great days, Little Man and I. Sometimes he was in one of his wicked moods and we had fights, a battle of wills. Little Man wanted to go one way—usually the nearest way home, and I had other ideas about it. And I always won and then he used to try and bite me. Once he threw me and I was dragged for half a mile. I saw stars, bits of blue sky, winter turf and cow platters, and finally—night. Just then my foot, mercifully, came free. After a while I awoke and caught Little Man who was grazing peaceably close by, pretending all was well.

'Where are you two going?' Those words came back to me this afternoon when I hacked down the old deserted lane on Jill. There was a roaring wind in the elm tops and the rooks got short shrift. It plucked my hat from my head and whirled it away over a fence and I had to go all the way round a tall hedge to get it again.

Deserted lanes fascinate me, the bounding hedges are never laid and yellowhammers, bullfinches, chaffinches and wood-pigeon love these places.

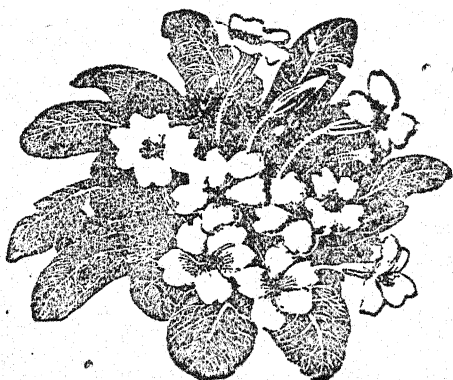
In the summer, redstarts build in the holes in the ivy creeper that grows round the big elm boles and they start their anxious 'U-wit, U-wit' as soon as one enters the ride, and fly before, showing their rusty tails. This particular lane where I rode this afternoon used to be a coach road and traces of it are found right away in the field beyond the Hawking Tower. Just now it is very miry because the cattle come down it every evening to the farm and the puddles are full of rotted leaves. Mud has a very pleasant

smell—clean mud, that is—and nowadays one almost forgets the scent of a muddy road in winter. There are few muddy roads left now, and one could almost walk in dancing shoes on most of the country roads, even in the wettest weather.

At each step Jill made a sucking sound as she pulled her hooves out of the slush, and there was a sense of luxury in being able to pass over such ground dryshod. A large stick thumped down within a yard of us and made the horse shy. On a branch of hawthorn, starred with red berries, a chaffinch was trying to keep its head to the wind. But a gust blew it sideways and turned him inside out, showing his winter woolies. Poor little birds, how they must hate wind!

But the most interesting thing I saw was a greater spotted woodpecker climbing up a birch tree. He sat watching me for some time peeping round the bole, and then, when I rode off a short way, he went into a hole half-way up; evidently his roosting tree. Woodpecker, spotted and green, always seem to sleep night after night in their old nesting holes, all through the year.

After leaving the old road I cantered across the fine grass beyond the Hawking Tower, with the wind behind us all the way, and so home by way of the Hinton road where a pale sunset showed up the tossing traceries of the winter trees.



Chapter the Fourth

Moonlight Magic

Few people, comparatively speaking, have looked on the beauty of moonlit woods, naked and stark, under the stars. The keeper and the poacher perhaps, no other men.

The keeper is intent on catching the poacher and protecting his master's game; the poacher is too intent on dodging the keeper and bagging game to notice the breathless wonder of night woods.

But to walk the woods alone at night is an experience that can never be forgotten, and a wood at night is far more eerie than a churchyard. For it is against one's natural instincts, and a man who finds pleasure in it is regarded as a madman. Even in the daylight a wood is mysterious and secret, at night it is a world that is unearthly. There is a sense of utter unreality that sends the hair creeping on your scalp.

I went alone to Wildwood to see for myself how it appeared under the moon. And I went in at the hand-gate by the side of the pool. When I came over the park, lying silver in the moonlight, the bare oaks threw a pattern of shadow on the grass, and on every blade the frost glistened. When I came over the shoulder of the hill I saw Wildwood lying in the hollow, with the shadows as black as ink under the trees and the stars watchful and remote. I am used to being abroad outdoors at night, but usually it is on the coast in sound of the low beating sea. But to-night there was no sound, no rush of distant surf, no far crying of wildfowl fighting about the ooze. I seemed to be standing in a star-encrusted cavern, where no life was, or ever would be. Not an owl hooted, not a fox barked in that awful stillness. Man lives in such a noisy

world nowadays that such silences affright him, and yet silence is beautiful and the senses are prepared for sleep.

- I opened the gate and stood a while with my hand upon it, looking up the ride. The bare ash poles rose, rank on rank, every twig and branch etched against the stars, and inky shadows barred the ground. Across the floor of the wood those shadows lay, a network of interlacing beauty, and beyond, the moonlight was flooding across the open glade. In the shadows close by stood the white notice board, 'Trespassers will be prosecuted, by order.' That silent threat, how empty it seemed, telling its message to the watching trees! Then my heart leapt, for something was sitting on the notice board. At first I took it to be a goblin and had to lay hold on my nerves. But soon I saw it was a white owl and it was regarding me with two apparently eyeless sockets, as dreadful as a skull. Then, when I shut the gate, it swept from its perch and slid away without a sound.

I went along slowly, keeping by instinct to the edge of the ride. Soon I came out into the moonlit patch beyond and saw the hard-edged moon and I was fascinated. Its baleful glare filled my whole brain, the craters on its surface became a face, its awful remoteness was staggering. The first time I saw the moon through a telescope I think I had my first doubts of personal survival as taught me by my elders and betters. And this world I found myself in now seemed almost as aloof and remote.

To my left the little fir trees were like jagged black teeth and to the left of the ride one great oak towered up, lit to its very topmost twig by the moonlight. Forcing myself against my will I went quietly into the little firs and there beheld a magic that surpassed all others I had seen.

The moonlight was filtering through and lighting up the open spaces under the black branches so that I could only see the stems of the trees against the dim light behind. And then at that moment I heard the most dreadful sound. It was a grunting, wailing scream, like a soul in its last torment. And it was far away, down the other end of the wood. I stood rooted to the spot, my scalp creeping.

I knew what it was, a fox calling for its mate, but this made no difference. And then, as I stood there the sound came again, and oh! horrors! it was nearer, and coming nearer.

And then panic seized me; I turned about and ran, ran so that I tripped over fallen branches and splashed into the puddles of rain water in the ride, ran until I came to the wall, ran until I left the wood behind and was panting at the top of the little meadow above Wildwood.

And behind me, still wailing, I heard that lost spirit of the woods.

No, the woods in the silent hours are not for man if he must keep his sanity; they are for the wild people to hunt in and to seek the easing of their passions. At night man must go to ground among his fellowmen. And in a curious way I realized then how artificial our existence really is. We take no account of the earth and the open air. We are still camping in the wilderness, our houses are frail things in all truth. A little earth tremor and we are without a roof, we are once again under the wide sky where we belong. Our houses are as insecure as the roosting place of owls or the holes of the foxes. It is the earth, ages old, that matters, and the wide sky and wheeling dusts of stars.

How can we learn humbleness of mind, how appreciate the true littleness of man? Even the trees outlive us, even the wild goose and the golden eagle are longer in the world! I think we can learn that humbleness by turning a little from man-made things and seeking truth in a handful of scented earth, or by going to the woods at midnight when the trees are patterning the vacant rides.

Hinting Spring

This evening I took the gun and went down the meadows towards the pools. It was a cold grey evening, but the smell of spring was in the air, and, despite the wintry chill, blackbirds were warbling and the songthrushes were singing. That smell of spring has always puzzled me, because there can be little growth as yet and

the fields are still clothed in the dead ochre greys of winter. Yet it was there, that indefinable scent of coming summer; suggesting warm drowsy days, the cuckoo's call, the shadow of the skimming swallow passing over the sunlit hillside.

At the side of the first pond I stepped with caution, for the path is strewn with fallen sticks and dead leaves from the crowding oaks. Half-way down the path I stopped dead, for a rabbit had suddenly emerged on to the beaten track at about eighty yards' distance and was watching me with pricked ears. I stood where I was, not daring to move, and after a moment it began to nibble the grass. I began a stalk, but when I had gone some ten yards I saw the rabbit had vanished. Still walking with caution, I approached the spot where it had been and heard a rustle in the dead reeds on my left. I saw the rabbit bounding through the reeds, not threading its way through, but jumping like a kangaroo over the reed tussocks. It was a difficult shot, for it was going away from me and a lot of branches were in the way, but I fired. It went head over heels, and I jumped down the bank, leaving my gun against the fence. Having no dog with me, I had to wade out to it, and a grim business this was, for the black slime was fearfully cold, and I had no waders. But I retrieved the rabbit and returned to the path.

Stock Doves

Every evening now, round about five o'clock onwards, I see the stock doves wheeling with rigid wings round the tops of the high elms at the bottom of the home paddock. They glide about in circles in the manner of the domestic pigeon, with their wings raised very high and at an angle to the body. This is, I suppose, a form of courtship flight; at any rate, I have noticed this same thing every year about this time. They are round these trees again in the early mornings, and it is then also that the wood-pigeon come on to the tennis court, before anyone is astir. The other morning there was a large flock of pigeon feeding by the water garden. I hurriedly put on some clothes and went out, but when

I got there I saw only two. After a careful stalk, however, one paid the penalty. In the early mornings, too, I hear them cooing in the lime trees, a delicate summery sound, and when they frequent the trees so close to the house I let them alone, for I like to hear their soft voices.

An amusing thing happened the other day. My spaniel, who delights in hunting mice and is a great expert at catching them, was asleep before the fire. The butler went into the room and saw a mouse playing about on the top of his back amongst the fur. The dog was fast asleep and only awoke when the man killed the mouse with a poker. The dog then ate the mouse!

Baby rabbits are showing up everywhere, and I shot one by mistake the other evening. I saw its ears over a bank and took them to be those of an adult. I fired and found I had shot a wee rabbit scarcely out of the nest! The length of a rabbit's ears is nothing to go by, and in the fading light it is very hard to tell whether it is an adult or otherwise.

Drake Teal

On the last day of the wildfowl season I shot a teal. There were a few on the pools in the autumn, but during the hard weather I never saw one, nor have I seen a snipe in the marsh the whole time. But on the last day of February, I took the gun to stalk a large body of pigeon feeding above the pools. It was a difficult stalk, with little cover, and just when I was getting within striking distance, they all got up and flew away. A few moments later I caught sight of a mallard drake followed by the duck flying away from the middle pool. They were, of course, out of shot and never gave me a chance. But this mistake of mine made me approach the last pool with caution, and from behind some dead reeds I saw a drake teal swim out into the middle of the pond. I dropped like a stone, but it saw me and shot upwards with the rapidity of its kind. The gun flew to shoulder and the sound of the shot was followed by a splash. He was down and floating in the middle of the pool. My dog is laid up for the

time being, so I could not retrieve it, and for a long time had to watch it helplessly drifting into some fallen wood in mid-water. There was nothing for it but my piking tackle, so, hurrying back to the house, I got out my rod, and after a few long casts managed to get the weighted line beyond the dead body and draw it in to the bank. I found it was a perfect unscarred specimen of a teal drake and I have skinned it carefully and am mounting it.

So ended the fowling season. And with the passing of that season I am left with happy memories, memories of good nights on the coast and good dawns, too. If I were to state my total bag of fowl it would cause a great deal of amusement, especially after reading about the huge bags made by goose shooters. But I like a few birds well shot in difficult circumstances; that is, out on the marshes and tidal lands.

I shortly hope to fit a telescopic sight to my .303 rifle, which I am having fitted with a Morris tube for .22. This rifle was originally purchased for shooting caribou in Newfoundland, but the trip never came off because the game laws prohibit the killing of any large game in that country for some time to come. However, I hope with this new sight to become proficient with the rifle, and when the ban in Newfoundland is lifted, and I can see my way to an expedition, I shall be able to use the original bore.

March Sunlight and Orange Plough

From every rookery up and down the length and breadth of the land there comes the mating 'caw' of the rooks. They go to and fro with sticks and wool, and the reddish elm tops are very busy these times. I often think I could tell many of the seasons simply by the sounds of the countryside; the warbling of the blackbirds, bleat of lambs, and later the cuckoo and whitethroat. And in autumn it would be the robin's song and the clatter of the reapers in the fields. And now the great growth has begun; the grass is already beginning its first growth and within a week I have

seen the yellow hues of the winter fields fade into the stronger green.

The plough was easy walking this afternoon, and bright orange in the March sunlight. My shadow lay across the furrow and moved with me, betraying my approach to the pigeon resting out of the wind on the lee of the ash spinney. The bare poles clashed and squeaked; over the bright green fields came the flash of a rook's wing, and from the sheltered meadow by the brook rose the infant wailing of lambs. This dear old earth never grows old; each spring it is mysteriously new-born, as fresh and alive as ever. Only the earth has the secret of eternal life; we are no more than the passing shadow aslant the orange plough. Perhaps it was this solemn train of thought that made me unprepared for the rabbit that Sport routed from under a pile of hedge clippings. But the little rascal ran straight into the sun, and the surface of the meadow seemed to reflect the light as much as an arterial road.

On the clover the pigeon were massed, yet with this bright day what could I do? They all flew over the valley. Up the hawthorn hedge on the old glebe lands, a pigeon clattered out within ten yards, and I missed it. Back by way of marsh and pools. In order to save a blank day I shot at a moorhen that rose from out of the reeds. It dropped on the island, and, though the spaniel swam over to it, he would not bring it over to me, though I shouted myself hoarse. He was in one of his silly moods; perhaps it was the spring weather. As I walked over the soft ground at the head of the marsh three snipe rose. I swung up the gun, then remembered—3rd March!

Like Colonel Hawker, I determined to 'save my blank', so after tea I strolled down the meadow. Two pigeon passed over, bound for the park spinney. I fired, and one fell into the top of a hawthorn tree.

The Wind in Coldhangar

I dislike riding in a high wind and horses dislike it too. A horse will always turn at an angle to its full force, and when hunting, scent is naturally more tricky.

A fox took us across from Coldhangar towards Welmint, and it was in a fold in the valley I saw a lovely glimpse that would have delighted the eye of Lionel Edwards or Munnings. Hounds were running down a steep hill that was in shadow and suddenly they streamed out of the grey-green tones of the field into broad sunlight. Beyond, half hidden by the steep valley, I saw the bristly tops of the ash poles in Coldhangar. They were in full light, and the colour of bleached hay, with just a hint of a silvery gleam here and there where a trunk showed against the russets of the under-wood.

And what vivid spots of colour the pink coats made in the winter landscape!

Rocking in one of the higher poles (I saw this as we came down the hill at a swinging canter) was an old magpie's nest, a great bundle of twigs like a monster hedgehog. Even the old pigeon nests were defying the wind, mere slender platforms of interlacing twigs that looked as though the slightest puff would send them flying. When hounds were drawing the wood I sat my horse close to an oak tree growing in the hedge, a mighty tree with thick ivy cables as a winding sheet. These roots had been cut, however, at the base, just clear of the ground, so that the tree was saved. But the leaves had withered, a mass of Rembrandt brown foliage. And in the gale the tree was creaking like a ship. The sound reminded me of the old sailing vessel in which I went to the Dogger Bank, and the tree was talking in the same language. And another striking thing about this piping morning was the way the sun glanced on the bare twigs. It made them shine as if they were made of metal as did the grass blades also, a perfect shimmer of brilliance.

After we left Coldhangar, clouds blew up, and soon the scene had completely changed, and my spirits changed with it. We do not realize how sunlight lifts the spirits; one moment all the world is singing, it is good to be alive, and then a subtle change creeps over one and ideas and outlook change.

From Welmint the fox turned right-handed for the railway

station and hounds ran into him just short of the signal cabin, a good little hunt of an hour and five minutes with a five and a half miles' point.

Evening in Hieaway

Evening, Hieaway wood! When I reached the hill after a walk round the fields, a strong wind was rushing in the tops of the firs with a sound as of a distant sea. I had two rabbits on my walk round and missed another, an easy shot.

Five o'clock came and no pigeon appeared, but the evenings are getting so much lighter now that I expected them to be late. As I lay on my back under the privet bushes and watched the sky, a branch squeaked at intervals. After half an hour a hawk sailed over and lit in one of the firs, and a minute later seven pigeon skimmed the tree tops and lighted farther down the wood. I changed my hide, moving up the hill under the firs where a box thicket grows on the south slope. Very soon a pigeon landed on a branch a long shot off, I could see his white collar against the deep green shadow behind. I fired and he heeled over and fell with a crash into the underwood. At the report, the tree tops became alive with pigeon, and one settled in a feathery birch about ninety yards away. It was too long a shot, but I risked it. The pigeon flew off.

Then there was a lull and the light quickly grew dim. Finches rustled and ticked in the box bushes preparing for sleep. Then three pigeons landed a long shot off at the foot of the hill. I took careful aim at the nearest bird and he fell. 'Zink, zink, zink!'—a blackbird scolded in the distance. A hush fell and the wind died. I stole down the ride by the side of the hawthorn thickets. Against the sky one solitary pigeon sat hunched on top of a fir. I fired and he remained motionless for a full minute, then fell like a stone. Outside the wood a concourse of carrions flew, cawing hoarsely. The firing worried them and they wanted to come in to roost. Over the tops of the firs a one-sided orange moon peeped shyly.

Wood-pigeon

I decided to visit the pigeon at Hieaway this afternoon, and in the preliminary walk round I killed a rabbit, the only one I shot at.

Owing to my watch having stopped I was late at Hieaway wood and a large fleet of grey pigeon were already riding the tops of the two highest oaks above the spot where I usually ambush. I found the hide I always use much knocked about and weather-beaten, and as it would have taken too long to repair, I moved over the crest of the hill where the box bushes grow. Several pigeon soon landed higher up the wood and it was not until I had been there about half an hour that I heard a 'clap clatter' up in the tall firs. Peeping through the box I saw a pigeon sitting in the top of an oak about ninety yards away. Though he was screened with twigs I fired and hit him, but never saw him fall. A second later, all the pigeon that had been disturbed at the shot passed high overhead with a rushing sound. Now there was a lull. A little owl was calling below the hill. Suddenly a pattering and rustling began all around that made the spaniel start and cock his ears. But it was only a sharp shower that ceased as suddenly as it began. Then with a 'swoosh' a pigeon landed directly above me in a birch. He paid the penalty. Soon another pigeon landed a long shot off, low down and screened by twigs. It looked a hopeless shot but I fired and thought I had missed, but later, when I walked down, I saw the grey body lying on the brown leaves at the foot of the tree. Now I stole down the ride. Hundreds of pigeon were roosting in the straggly firs that grow down the ride edge. They had been driven there by the firing, and I made a mental note of this for future visits. But all the pigeon clattered off and, as it was so dark, I could not see them before they took wing.

When I crossed the hill to the farm a lone plover was calling from the plough, the only sound in a universe of utter quiet and peace.



'A Fox left as soon as Hounds entered'



Shouting March

The world was singing like a great harp; the strings were the hedgerow oaks and tossing thorns, the harpists the March winds. Large spaces of clean-washed blue sky were spread overhead, across which sailed the slow piled mountains of yellow cloud.

Truly the shooting season is over, yet the pleasure of the 'walk round' is enhanced if you take a gun. Pigeon and vermin can be shot, and it helps to keep your 'eye in'.

A flock of rooks were tossing up in the blue spaces, wavering like tea-leaves thrown into a stream. Another speck was below them that was not a rook, for it swooped in one long glide, with sickle-like wings, and lit in the top of a tall elm above the pools. I crept up the hedge with the spaniel at heel and cautiously approached the group of trees. There, high up on a splintered branch sat a sparrow-hawk, surveying the bright landscape spread out below his lofty vantage point. Yet he was out of range and I must get nearer. Slipping like a weasel from bole to bole I got within striking distance of the elm and looked upwards through the tossing branches. My eye followed the sunlit trunk up and up into the blue oceans, yet I could not see the hawk. Then I crept round the rough trunk and looked up the other side. At first I saw nothing and then I noticed a small knob about fifty feet above me, and a second later I realized that this was the hawk's head. I began to raise the gun, but the knob vanished, and as I ran out from behind the trunk I saw a distant planing shape departing on curved wings.

Holy Island Memory

Here are a few more anecdotes in connection with my time up at Holy Island. I went one evening to some shallow meres not far from the sea. They appeared to be mostly flood water, and in no case more than two feet in depth. I chose a small pool in preference to a much larger one that my companion fancied, and finding a thick tussock of rush, I sat down to wait.

A most lurid sunset flamed over the wild Cheviots, and this blood-red colour stained the water in front of my hide. All about, thick tussocks of rush grew, each rush reflected faithfully in the still mirror.

The evening was very frosty, but I felt no chill for I was well wrapped up, and as I watched the dying light I suddenly recollected that it was my last night in this rugged country, and I was sorry. At length, just as the colour had almost faded from the west, I heard the approaching mallard coming in over the sand dunes.

A party of six passed high on my left, but I refrained from firing. It was lucky I did so, for they turned and I had the satisfaction of seeing a fine drake turn turtle and hit the water with a splash, and then with my left barrel I missed one of the little party as it rocketted overhead.

After that there was a lull. Then I heard a mallard drop in somewhere behind me. It started to quack and I managed to call it up into the pool at the back of my hide. But the light was so bad I could not see it, and while I was debating on what course to take, a distant shot from my friend disturbed it and it flew off towards the sea.

It was broad moonlight when I made my way back to my friend, and as I approached the pool he fired again, the sound of the shot ringing out like a thunderclap in the quiet night. But he had had no luck, though several had pitched not far away.

Wildwood Gale

This afternoon a full gale was blowing from the south-west and I, of course, made all haste for Wildwood with a plentiful supply of cartridges. On approaching the pool three birds were swimming in the centre which were certainly not moorhens. Then three mallard spun up and circled over the trees. The great wind caught them and hurled them back over my head.

It was just about 3.50 when I entered the wood, and after

a bit of searching I found a fir tree surrounded by thick underwood which formed a good hide. I had hardly crawled inside when I saw three duck sweep over my head and land again in the pool. I gave them time to settle down and then, for fun, started a stalk through the thick undergrowth. But when I reached the edge of the pool the duck had gone, though I had never seen them leave. At that moment the first pigeon dropped in, lighting low on an oak branch some distance away. He saw me moving in the underbrush and left the bough, but my shot caught him amidships and dropped him neatly into a privet bush. Then for a long while there was a lull. The nearby ash poles—how pigeon love them!—kept up a continual clashing so that at times it sounded as if an army of men was marching through the thickets. I called four bullfinches up to my little tree, they are always to be found in this particular wood, and they hopped about all round me, three hens, and a cock with a breast as red as a baked brick.

Then I noticed two pigeon drop into an oak some distance away, and, deciding quickly, I changed my hide—sometimes a fatal thing to do. But I found a good thicket of blackthorn and here I settled down. Minutes passed. A songthrush came and sang in a high oak, his flute-like notes whipped away by the wind. Through the tops of the trees the gale passed like an express train, dwarfing all other sounds by its mighty passion. Then, as the first heavy drops of rain lashed the thorns, the pigeon began to arrive. I have never seen pigeon come so fast. Driving low in the teeth of the gale into the lower branches of the oaks, others passing right on over into the fastnesses of the wood itself.

Almost every minute I was firing through the interstices of the thorns at the tossing grey shapes. A quarter of an hour and all was over. The green moss of the hide was littered with empty cases, and before the light died I groped and fought my way through the thickets to collect the dead. I picked up a round dozen; the best night at pigeon that I have had for a long while. Two birds went away hard hit to drop in the blackthorn thickets.

and I could not find them. I stuffed as many as I could in my game bag and carried the rest in both hands to the car. Pigeon, if carried by the legs, have an annoying habit of slipping out of the fingers, and I had a tiresome journey to the road.

It was late when I reached the car. A yellow rent to the west threw the lashing trees of Wildwood in sharp relief, and the lonely pool glimmering at its feet appeared like a sheet of dull steel.

Impudent Jack

I must relate an incident that happened to me while piking not long ago. I found a new pool not very far from my home where pike abound in great plenty. The weather was cold and grey and a strong breeze ruffled the surface; I always like a bit of wind when 'piking'. It was not long before my friend's float dived under and he landed a nice fish, to be followed immediately afterwards by another.

I had placed the keep net in the water not far away, in which were about thirty small roach, and I was soon mystified by a great splashing going on in its vicinity. Hurrying up, I saw a jack of about two pounds hanging motionless about three feet from the net, displaying deep interest in its contents. As I watched he dived forward and worried a fish through the meshes, so I gave him a belt with the gaff handle. This, however, had no effect, and he returned again and again to the attack until I wearied of his impertinence. Putting on a small bait, I dangled it up and down in front of him. It was promptly seized and swallowed, and in a second I had whipped him out on to the bank. This only shows how determined pike are when hungry, and it was altogether an interesting experience.

Evening Vespers

I could not help thinking the other night, as I lay under the thorn bushes of Wildwood, how pleasant it is to be out in the woods at this time of year. There was a hint, more than a hint, of coming

spring in the air. Thrushes were singing, some near and some far, and all at once a blackbird started to warble. Of all the bird songs, that of a blackbird is to me the most associated with the days when all is green. As I lay listening, the bare trees were forgotten; I saw golden fields of buttercups, the hedgerows heavy with the may, and the distant muffled-blue of woods, dreaming in summer heats. And I remember those days last summer when I pushed my way through the thick undergrowth of this very wood, the sweat streaming down my face, in search of bullfinches' nests.

All the mighty growth and force of Nature seemed dammed up on the cold leaf-strewn earth on which I lay, yet in twelve weeks' time that great swelling life will be nearing maturity and fulfilment.

The evening was too calm for pigeon, though I got two, but large numbers came in to roost farther back in the woods. Two duck were also on the pool, but the twigs of a bush deflected my rather hurried shot as they rose from behind some willows. I found a pigeon that I missed the other night in the dusk, lying in some thick undergrowth close to my hide which made my bag of the 16th up to thirteen.

One by one the birds ceased their vespers until silence reigned, save for the far clap of a pigeon's wing amidst the ash poles. And as I passed the pool a large pike jumped, out in the middle where the weeds are still remaining after the mild winter.

The Bark of a Fox

These last few days of shooting are precious. After this month is out the regular Saturday afternoon shoot will be a thing of the past, and even now there is nothing to shoot but pigeon; rabbits are beginning to breed and no longer lie out as is their winter habit.

Last night I went to Hieaway, hiding up farther back in the woods where young firs grow. Beneath the dark roof the moss was green, and looking along the floor of the forest, as it were, I could see for some distance as down a tunnel. From be-

hind a rotten log something moved, and I saw it was a squirrel. It nipped about between the scaly red stems of the little trees, intent on its own business. Soon it found something that interested it at the foot of one of the firs and it sat up and nibbled with nervous movements. Then a rabbit went hopping along some distance off and vanished into the green gloom. The squirrel went jumping away and the light began to fade. After the rain ceased the thrushes began to sing and a mist rolled up from the pool.

Pigeon streamed past and lit in the tops of some high trees about a hundred yards away until the branches seemed to bear a strange blobby fruit. At last two passed over, and firing up through the fir I brought one down. From the distant trees the grey legion arose with a mighty thunder and came wheeling over, giving me another successful shot. Now the shadows gathered so thickly under the pigmy trees that a forest of vast extent was suggested and all sense of scale was lost. Against the pale sky, ash poles stood motionless, and suddenly, in the profound quiet, a distant fox barked—an eerie, sinister sound.

Spring Hacking

A perfectly glorious afternoon. I went a long hack round by Nutwood and Shelverdene with Margaret. She was riding Chloe and I was on Jill, and the horses went very well.

First down the lane out of the village that winds with the natural simplicity of a sheep track and the hedges are untamed and full of birds. Then through three gates on to the wide rolling grass where the gorse bushes were rich gold and alive with twanging linnets. Here the lane has no bounding hedge but weaves about between the turf like a downland road, and many sheep and lambs were lying on the white ribbon; they seem to like resting on a hard surface and did not move as we cantered by on the grass, only turning their stupid faces as we passed.

In one corner of a little meadow we came to a small pond set in a fold of the ground and at one end, pushing their way from us

in the weedy green water, were three mallard, two ducks and a fine drake, his green neck flashing in the sunlight. As we did not stop, but walked past at about thirty yards, they did not take wing but swam slowly away with their beady eyes fixed upon us. No doubt there will be a nest there later, as the pond is in a remote spot and a long way from any human habitation.

From this pond we had a good gallop past Coldhangar, still in its winter nakedness of bleached ash poles. But the floor of the wood was gay with yellow splashes, for primroses were in bloom, and rooks were cawing their spring music from the rookery beyond. Still in the deep ditches I saw patches of old snow, white no longer, but a dirty grey like the tired summer snows of the Austrian alps. The ground is so high here and so exposed that there must have been big drifts after the last fall of snow some weeks ago. And so on to Windytree farm where we came into the very miry lane and the smell of pigs and straw. Before the farm, in the little orchard, was a single white lamb that spied us afar and came to meet us, bleating vigorously. It trotted behind my horse and insisted on following, and even when we broke into a trot it scurried behind, complaining loudly. So there was nothing for it but to stop, and it came running up and stood under Margaret's mare. She dare not move in case the little beast might be kicked, so I walked Jill back to the farm at the end of the lane and the lamb came after. I saw hay tossing over a lichened wall and found the farmer in his stackyard and handed over the waif. And then we went on to Shelverdene village with the cottage gardens gay with crocus and children playing shrilly in the street.

It is always a sign that summer is coming when the children play in the spring evenings, and on the allotments shirt-sleeved rustics were busy over their spades.

The sun dimmed to a tender rose, promising a fine spell of weather, and in the air was a mingled scent of earth and wood smoke, the latter scent striking an autumnal note that seemed out of key in some curious way.

We come to associate scents and sounds with different periods

of the year, and at such moments we realize how true this is. The scent of wood smoke should be accompanied by the robin's trill, but now a blackbird was warbling, low and sweet, in the shrubberies of the Vicarage garden.

The Last Run with Hounds

This is, I suppose, the last run with hounds I shall have this year and, as was fitting, it was a good one. A dull gentle morning for the meet at Shelverdene, with a light breeze from the south-west; rooks very busy about the tree tops, some sitting apart, side by side, obviously suffering from love-sickness (which appears to be as incapacitating as sea-sickness); two blackbirds having a fight by the side of the road, one getting a grip on the other's neck and worrying it like a terrier; chaffinches singing their spring songs, oft repeated; and a very early chiffchaff singing in a little wayside spinney.

There was a big field assembled under the grey towers of Shelverdene Court, and the park was dotted with foot people. Some riders were walking their horses up and down under the trees, others were chatting and sampling the very excellent refreshments provided by our genial host, and hounds were undergoing their usual ordeal of hero worship. I am sure that Orator was giving his autograph to several young people!

At last we move off in an echoing cavalcade, a brave company under the sweeping beech trees, whose roots were clothed with snowdrop napkins. Chaffinches flew up and pinked at us as we went past, and by the box plantations I saw a young hound rioting after a terrified rabbit which eventually got away through the legs of the horses. A grey squirrel peeped round a beech trunk at us as we passed beneath, though few people noticed him.

We came out into the main road, regarded by the disdainful griffons holding their blazoned shields, and so to Shelverdene woods with the bloom of reddish buds already showing where branches were massed together, and angry carriages went flagging away, cawing hoarsely in their evil voices.

A fox left as soon as hounds entered and, jumping the stone wall with easy grace, slipped away towards the lakes. Here the waterfowl arose and circled, mallard and widgeon together; moorhens scurried for the shelter of the reeds, a comb of silver spray at their heels. Four indignant swans backed water uneasily and swore in hissing breath at these disturbers of their peace, and finally, finding the noise and bustle too much for their injured pride, took threshing wing. They passed 'wooshing' over the beech avenue, necks nodding and black legs tucked up, and disappeared in the direction of the park.

Hounds and riders were reflected in the lake as they streamed up the grey-green slope, and the earth shook with the tattoo of hooves. Through the bracken now, in the far beech wood; red leaves scattering right and left, and broken sticks flung from violent impact; past a little black pool in the middle of the wood where a startled heron with staring eye launched himself upwards with impatient strokes of wide grey mantled wings. Out of the wood by the keeper's cottage, the keeper's pants and vest blowing on the line and frantic pheasants darting, head down tails up, for the shelter of the hollies. On now for the home farm and its wall of neat haystacks, ranged like a protecting palisade, and cowardly turkeys, all bullying swagger forgotten, running like hens under the yard gate. Everything running within sight, what a mad nation we are! Two shepherds were running from the lambing yard, some brown calves galloping too, all in the same direction, not caring as long as they ran. The farmyard cur throttled on his chain, saliva drooling from his jaws; he, poor creature, was held and could not run.

From the duck pond a grave regiment of sandy ducks marching, talking together in low tones. Suddenly through the fence slipped the fox and passed right through the middle of them. They burst asunder, like a bomb, and flew quacking about the pond margin, one fell over in the excitement. They had barely time to regain the sanctuary of mid-water when the hounds were melting through the hedge, all speaking to the scent. When they came to

the place where the ducks had been they checked and faltered, with subdued yelps of baffled anger. Orator, casting wide, picked up the line and so away again for the Benthorn road. Here a motorist, standing gaping on the back seat, turned the fox, and instead of crossing the road, it doubled back and made for the gorse below the windmill. Some years ago this windmill was struck by lightning and since that sultry summer night the sails have ceased to turn.

A white-aproned woman was standing in the little yard where the millstones lie—hidden in summer by nettle jungles—with her hand to her eyes. As we cantered up the slope the sun came out and gilded the little fields, ringing the elm tops with light and flashing along the canal. From the mill top some white pigeons fly with a rattle, and I can see moss on the weathered planks. A Lilford owl bobbed on a post rail and flew with dipping flight, showing his spotted coat. A fan of starlings rose from a little meadow dead ahead and I knew we were getting up to the fox. This bustle of the hunt passed like a sudden wind through the peaceful countryside, whirling the white chickens like paper, driving the birds skywards, and setting even the static cows in motion, until it seemed as if they could really jump the moon.

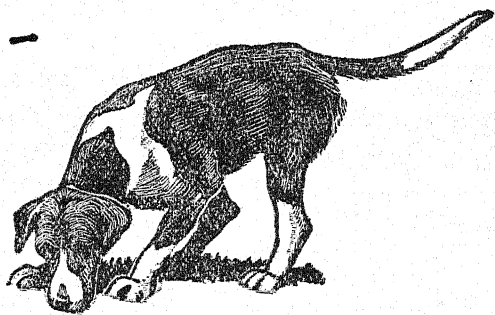
The gorse was only three fields away, but I never thought our gallant little pilot would make it. But he did. He beat his pursuers by a short head and went to ground in a badger sett, where, I am glad to say, the Master left him.

Now the run was over, the countryside returned to its usual peace. The woman went into the millhouse and went on with her washing, the pigeon came back to the mill roof and sidled and cooed as they felt the spring in their blood. The starlings settled again, a burnished carpet on the meadow.

• Away on the duck pond the ducks were discussing the recent happenings in watery undertones, and the farm dog was indulging in a luxurious scratch, with a comic smile on his uplifted peppery face. By the keeper's cottage the washing had been taken in and pheasants were creeping jerkily about the park.

Some things remained to tell of that gust of movement that had sent all things so mad. A broken binder in the hedge, the hoof-ringed turf, scattered ant hill; a strand of wire cut by the huntsman, lying coiled on itself like a grey briar, wicked and wounding, made in the first instance to catch and hold man in the deserts of No Man's Land until a whining bullet got him.

Having no second horse I went home through a sunny afternoon, in my ears the bleat of new dropped lambs and the song of throistles. On the eastern horizon sat a vast cloud mountain lit by the slanting sun, with shadows in its corries, more vast than Everest and as splendid.



Chapter the Fifth

Hieaway Spring

A soft spring evening with thrushes singing and blackbirds warbling. The thorn hedge by the hand-gate into Hieaway was all over green speckles—'bread and butter' the country people call the budding twigs—and there was a thrush sitting on four eggs in a box bush hard by.

A friend had the rifle and I had the twelve, and after helping him repair the hide under the high trees, I went on over the slope and crawled under the box bushes at the upper end of the wood. For a long while nothing came. In the meadows close by, lambs were bleating, and the air was full of spring sounds, both near and far. From where I lay I could see all down the southern slope of the wood, over the light-scraped soil of the badger setts and rabbit warren, down to where the holly trees grow close to the boundary hedge. Small finches chased each other in the high branches, and a yaffle called frequently. Quite a different place this to the stark wintriness of the wood earlier in the year, though the dead leaves strewn thickly about brought back memories of winter evenings.

Suddenly a pigeon started to coo a long way off and another answered it. Two baby rabbits bounced out of a distant hole and back again. Crack! The sudden shock of sound split the gentle murmurs of the spring evening. I heard the whine of a bullet high over the firs, a clatter of departing pigeon and higher up the wood, about fifty yards away, the sullen thump of a falling body. My friend had shot true.

Again a long time passed. These March evenings drag on and on, the light never seems to alter. Then four pigeon landed in the

top of a far oak, a long way out of range. One bird was outlined on a topmost twig. For amusement I trained my sights on him and lay a long while thus. Crack! The still-hunched figure heeled slowly and crashed into the bushes. My friend's bullet had again found its billet, though he was a hundred yards higher up the wood.

'These .22 rifles are deadly things,' thought I, and lit my pipe. Almost at once I heard the sound of whistling wings and three pigeon passed over. One paid the penalty and fell into the top of one of the hollies. He crashed right through in a cloud of down, and I saw him lying still and grey on the dead leaves about fifty yards away. Crack! thump! another down to my friend (his eye is in to-night). Just at darkling the carrions came in in a body, and I shot two within a few minutes of each other.

Six pigeon were in the game bag when we walked back to the car, and plover were calling over the plough where the last light lingered, shining on the neatly turned furrows.

The Swallow's Life

Last Tuesday I saw the first swallow arrive. It is one of a pair that has built for some years in my garage, and its mate has not yet appeared. Hearing suddenly the summer-like ripple of song, I was just in time to see it enter a skylight over the stable door. I opened the door quietly and tiptoed in. At first I could not see it, but eventually found it perched on the end of a beam in the far loose box. It was sitting quite motionless and appeared very tired, and though the sun was shining outside, it never attempted to fly out again and seemed quite unafraid of myself or the spaniel. How is it that the swallow is held in such reverence? Not even the village lads will disturb their nests—at least in this part of the world—and there are superstitions about the bird which are still observed by the old folks. I must confess that it made me feel somewhat insignificant and humble to see that gallant little scrap sitting on the end of the beam. I thought of the long days of autumn and of winter, and the countless hours which have passed since I saw the last swallow. I have been going about my daily

round like a mouse in a cage and that little bird has been roaming in distant sunny lands, each day so splendidly free. And to a swallow, life must seem endless and each day a generation. And then, too, one thinks of the golden hours of sunlight that make up a swallow's life; the major part of its existence is spent in that glorious light that seems the very essence of life itself. Perhaps it thinks of England only as a land of sunshine and green things; of hawthorn blossom, flowering chestnut candles, and the warm muddy margins of little wayside ponds, where it gathers material for its nest on a summer's evening.

And so now our thoughts turn away from winter days, when the air is keen and the bracken is rusty gold. And I linger in my mind over the summer days that lie ahead, of white roads banded by cool shade and the depths of summer woods.

Otter Hunting in Kingcup Time

The otter hounds were late in arriving. We hung about in the cold wind scanning the road beyond the station, but it was a long time before the van topped the crest of the hill. A puncture had held them up and they were without a spare wheel on the van. A cap of half a crown was taken as we passed through the gate, and then we were walking down the stream, lined with silver-budded pussy willow.

The stream was still swollen with the winter floods, wreckage was strewn along the bushes—broken branches and dead grass. The hounds went busily across the shallows, sending spray flying and a scared moorhen scurrying.

There came the bleat of lambs and a distant cuckoo's voice, and, hawking above the willow thickets, a swallow. With a casual air the brook wound all about, in figure of eights and S bends, always interesting, always varied. New rushes were thrusting up sheaves of green swords through the dead growth, and on the sunny banks the first daisies and buttercups starred. But no whimper came from the hounds until we had gone fully a mile down to the mill and the osier beds. Here an ancient willow leans right across the stream,

so old that moss and grass grow in its riven crown, and one starved plane tree, about two feet high, grown from a seed dropped by some bird that had perched in the slender wands above.

The hounds became excited, and just as the Master, in his dark blue coat and gold buttons, was crossing the ford, a sheaf of champagne bubbles streamed from the holt under the tree. All was instant excitement as the otter made down stream towards the mill. He reached the deep water under the millwheel, and though we tried for an hour we could not find him again and so went on below for another mile and a half.

Here the hounds found a drag leading from a little drain and from it a fine dog otter was bolted. We hunted him downstream for a hundred yards and twice I saw him rise, close to the grey-green wild iris clumps. They lined the stickle below and the otter turned back and came up for breath just below me. It was only an instant's glance but the face of that otter was fearful. In its eyes was the pitiful terror of all hunted creatures and the second I saw it, the mouth opened in a gasp that seemed to me to be terribly human. Then the hounds had him in the shallows and I turned away.

Across the field, gold with kingcups, a mare and foal were watching us, the foal pressed close to its mother's side. Beyond was the bridge lined with cars, and people were leaning over the warm parapet, where the flies like to settle out of the wind and where a wagtail had a half-built nest in the ivy. The piled cloud galleons a-sailing before the wind made moving patterns over the water meadows, so that one half of the landscape was as seen on a dull day and the other aflame with sun, both intensified by the contrast. And from the boughs of a willow close at hand a chiff-chaff was 'chaffering' happily. From every budding bush, willow warblers sang, the tender yellows and greens of their plumage matching the spring greens of the herbage, and the stream was so bright in the shallows that the flashing diamonds dazzled the eyes.

It was a world of promise and life, in which death should play no part at all, but before my eyes I still saw that open mouth, seeming to make despairing yet silent supplication.

And so I left the hounds and moving figures in their blue coats and I walked back through the golden kingcups and smelt the river smell; that 'unforgettable, unforgotten' river smell, rising from the marshy edge of the water. Near the end of this kingcup carpet a snipe rose and climbed into the April blue. Higher and higher, with quick beating wings, and then it turned and passed away down river, while the otter hunters toiled like pygmies along the winding snake of silver beneath.

Otters are devoted to their young, and I was told of a case where the mother otter fetched her two cubs out of a hollow willow and carried them to safety when the hounds were all around the holt. One of the huntsmen told me that it is quite a mistake to suppose that otters can catch a fish, unless it has it cornered. The otter is not a swift swimming animal in the water, but progresses comparatively slowly, and could never catch a fish that was swimming 'flat out'. They will catch and kill weakly fish, or fish that are diseased, and in this way render good service. Their principal food is eel, and fish are by no means their staple diet as most people seem to think. A spent otter will not show a line of bubbles behind him, but a fresh-bolted otter leaves a thick trail. This, of course, is the air in his fur. All these things the huntsman told me, and I suppose he ought to know.

Death of a Big Trout

'No, you won't catch no trout down there, Sir, tiddlefs maybe, and stickky backs, but no trout!' So said the old gardenér. But I liked the look of the stream and had heard rumours, so I went this morning to see for myself.

Weather grey and almighty frigid, with a strong breeze. The fact I had a streaming cold did not help matters. I found the brook much overgrown with trees and bushes and in few places could one get a fly on to the water at all. After losing four flies and two casts I almost gave up in disgust. But I saw not far away a little island of willow wands, so sheltered from the wind by a high

sandy bank that they were hardly bending. The island tailed off into a gravelly spit, and below was a fair-sized pool. At the end, the water hurried, chattering, round a steep little bluff, and this looked a nice run. I crept down the shingle and made my first cast. Result, hung up in the willows behind! Got it free, tried again, and this time the fly went out nicely (March brown) and was carried round the bend. Instantly a rise, and a heavy fish. He came bolting upstream into the pool and for a few seconds I had to reel in like blazes to get a tight line on him.

He sulked for about four minutes on the bottom and then made a rush for the bend. I held on to him, for once round he would be lost in a rather muddy-looking pond full of rotten wood. He came back into the pool again, tiring, and I saw a gleam of gold, and a huge wedge-shaped tail flapped on the surface like a harpooned whale's. My heart was in my mouth for it was the best trout I had ever had on and then I felt for my net. IT WAS GONE! I must have dropped it coming up through the willows, but gingerly screwing my head round I could not see it anywhere, so decided to beach the trout on the shingle, after killing him as best as I could.

After a quarter of an hour I saw him coming in, slowly and sideways, a long speckled beauty and deep withal. I slid him up the shallows and there was a wild flapping. I got my feet behind him and then he was up the bank, kicking in some green stinging nettles. What a fish! A three pounder! I went on down the stream with a singing heart and tried several likely-looking places but did not have another run. I found, however, the half-eaten 'corp' of another huge trout, probably speared by a heron. It seemed to be an even bigger fish than mine. I fished right down to the Bird in Hand (I hope this won't give the stream away) but did not have another fish. And then as Pepys has it, 'so home' well satisfied with the morning's work. As for the old gardener he did not know what to say. I have sworn him to secrecy however, for if it got about all the local lads would be down with a tin of worms and 'gorge 'ooks,' and that would never do. Besides, the old Commander would not like it.

.22 in Wildwood

Last night at about five o'clock I went to Wildwood and 'holed up' under the stunted pines. It was bitterly cold, even under the trees, and I had a long vigil. Soon the sky grew dark and flakes of snow began to fall, making a charming picture. I was sheltered from the flakes, but I could see them falling in a little clearing beyond the deep shadow of my hide. My feet grew so numb that I lit a little fire of pine twigs, which was much appreciated by the spaniel. After letting the fire burn for ten minutes I stamped it out and stood in the embers; soon my feet were beautifully warm and kept so for the rest of the evening. Outside, the snow fell unceasingly, wandering down between the slender aspens and lodging on the fronds of dead bracken. I could imagine myself a hunter in the backwoods, and the dog sat up with cocked ears listening to the tiny rustle of the falling flakes. Of a sudden there was a clapper in a distant oak and I saw a pigeon looking about him. It was a difficult shot for there were twigs in the way, but I cuddled the stock of the .22 into my shoulder and peeped down the aperture sight. I found the sights a little out of alignment, so I gave the peep two clicks to the right, got my target clear, and held my breath. The range was about ninety yards. The hollow 'thock' that followed the bullet's flight told of a direct hit and the pigeon opened his wings and fell. So little sound do these .22's make when fitted with a silencer that two pigeon landed almost at once in a tree about forty yards distant and one was an easy shot. He fell like the last, killed instantly, and lay on the sloping bank among the bracken fronds. Then three landed in the top of a spindly, tall pine about 150 yards away, right at the far end of the wood. It looked an impossible shot and there were several branches in the way. As I watched them several more, wheeling round, caught sight of their companions and landed on the same tree. Taking as careful aim as I could in the fading light—the bird was a mere speck in the centre of the foresight ring—I squeezed the trigger. To my amazement the bird fell like a stone, and I had made the best shot I have ever had with a rifle.

As the shadows fell I returned the rifle to its case and went out to collect my birds. The far pigeon was soon discovered, as was the first I shot, but when I went to collect the other bird it was nowhere to be found. I searched until dark but could find no trace. This same thing happened to my friend in the same wood the other evening. Here is a mystery then! There was no question of the pigeon being wounded, the expanding bullet had killed it outright, yet some creature had taken the dead bird within a few yards of where I lay. What is this mysterious thief?

There is a badger sett close by, and I know foxes abound in Wildwood, can they be the robbers?

The Mallards' Nest

A pair of mallard are nesting on the island in the middle pond, and twice this last week I have disturbed the duck off her nest. This nest is about twelve feet up in the fork of a may tree amongst the ivy, a curious place for a duck to choose, but the chief reason for the choice is probably rats, which abound in the reeds.

I am disturbed about the number of magpies that are about here, the other morning I counted at least twelve feeding in a field. There is a curious fact about magpies which other readers may have noticed. Their nests are very often built in the wayside trees and high thorn hedges in full view of passers-by, yet I do not remember ever seeing a magpie either building or leaving one of these nests. I think they must build early in the morning before anyone is about. Whenever I have climbed to a magpie's nest the eggs have been warm, but I have seen no sign of the bird.

Birds build very quickly, especially later in the season. A thrush or a whitethroat will complete a nest in about three days, or even less, at the height of the breeding season. I have been much amused this last week at seeing a mistlethrush building on the overhanging branch of an American oak that grows on the lawn. About seven o'clock onwards it is very busy, flying to and fro with beakfuls of moss and arranging the pieces in a cunning fashion. I watched it for some time with a powerful telescope.

When inside the rim of the nest it stands or sits almost on its breast and turns round and round, at the same time treading the moss in with its feet. I always admire these birds; they choose the most exposed places for their nests and are courage personified when any cat or carrion threatens. Only the sly jay is a match for them and he generally waits for the guardians to be absent.

Since the gentle rains of the past few days the hedges are a mist of tender green, but the chiffchaff have not yet arrived here and are very late, as I usually hear them in March.

Green Tips to the Firs

I have just come in from what, I suppose, will be my last 'smack' at the wood-pigeon. This sharp spell of unkind weather seems to have caused the flocks to reappear about the fields here, and for some time past a stubble field close to Wildwood has been 'blue' with them. But the mystery is, where do these birds go to roost? Pigeon shooting at this time of year is a different proposition to that of the winter months. They are vermin, so must be killed, though as a general rule I put my gun away until the autumn. These long evenings they do not come in a body; one never knows when to expect them, and they start dribbling in from six o'clock onwards.

However, taking the 12-bore and a handful of cartridges, I posted off to Wildwood just before six and got under the little fir trees above the pool. It was a cold evening, but warm enough in the thick underworld. A pigeon came over a high oak and I hit it. The bird fell behind the tree and when I went to search for it I got completely lost and soon was unable to recognize the tree by which I had marked the pigeon down. Not until I had retraced my steps to where I had taken the shot was I able to see the tree again, and thus find my bird. It was lying amidst the fresh springing shoots of wild hyacinth. All the ash poles are sprouting green, and the firs putting forth little green tips. As I walked quietly down the main ride a half-grown rabbit slipped out of the bushes and went away, his white scut bobbing in the dusk. I fired

and rolled him over. At the shot 'carrions' shouted defiance from the far end where the oaks grow, and a terrified magpie flew chattering out of the conifers close at hand. And so it is good-bye to Wildwood until the oaks are yellowing, and the breath of winter is again whispering in their rusty leaves.

April Snow and Silver Downs

At the beginning of the week I paid a visit to Wiltshire. I do not think I shall forget the drive down because it was so unusual. There was bright sun to beyond Oxford, and then snow began to fall. It increased in density as I approached Malmesbury and had begun to lie. Then I saw the Wiltshire Downs mantled in snow, hanging, as it were, in the air, ghostly, distant and silvery. Below the downs the snow was not lying, and the contrast between the green fields and the snow-clad hills was most remarkable, seeming somehow unnatural and unpleasant.

Was there ever such a spring? No wonder the cuckoo has not arrived in these parts yet! Last night I saw a great company of swallows passing over, hawking about as they went along and twittering all together. Poor mites, they have not had a great welcome this year, and it seems as if the long winter is not over yet!

I have noticed a great many half-grown rabbits about and, as I have not been round for some time, they are appearing even in the home paddock. My spaniel caught a small rabbit under some bracken in the garden yesterday. Usually when he catches a rabbit he is so pleased with himself, and is so keen to let you know what a clever fellow he is, that he opens his mouth to bark, 'Look what a clever dog I am, Master!' and the rabbit promptly departs. But this time, as I was some way off he forebore to pass any remarks, and when I came up I found he had killed it.

Bibury Beauty

I came down to this country on Friday, journeying through the lovely Cotswold country with its grey stone houses and wide

sweeping hills. And I came through Bibury, and as usual, the sun was shining, and the rooks were busy in the tall trees over the water. Whenever I have been to Bibury the sun has always shone and therefore I think of it always as one of the most heavenly villages in Britain. Hudson once said that there were some places which he would never want to see again because the first impression might be spoilt by climatic change. I have risked this with Bibury and I have been lucky.

And so, after staying a while in this pleasant place (sitting on the warm stone wall of the bridge and watching the newly-arrived swallows dip and skim over the crinkling surface of the water), I took the road again. Soon—so rightly too I fancied—dark grey storm clouds massed ahead and in the twinkling of an eye the sunny vision vanished. Bibury truly became a bright memory only and the rain drummed on the windscreen in a wintry tattoo.

To-day I have been rambling round the old haunts here, in Somerset, and found a long-tailed tit had built in the same bramble brake over the brook. One of the boys climbed to the nest of a magpie built in the top of a very high fir and found five eggs.

The Grey-Faced Mendips

A cold country this, with its grey stone villages and wild upland country round the Mendip hills. It seems that here the winter is loth to depart and the rusty leaves of the beech hedges seem as if they will never go. Round the rough hill pastures, where the bracken still lies dead-gold, the curlew's call brings back to me memories of the tides and mud flats.

This morning I rode with a friend along a high ridge of the Mendips, and in one place we had some difficulty to reach the top. Great grey blocks of stone barred our way, and it was only by walking the horses at an angle to the hill we got up at all; even then we were hanging on to the front of the saddle to prevent ourselves falling backwards. But once up, what a view spread out below us! Away in the distance I could see Glastonbury Tor and Wells with its mellowed cathedral misted with the blue reek of the

town. As we watched, the clouds rolled away and the wide beautiful valley became aflame with sunlight. Just beneath us the woods stretched down the hillside, still purple-brown and bristly and showing little trace of green. Then we wheeled the horses and went at a gallop along an old road bounded by grey walls. Soon we were lost, and nothing but grey walls and wide rolling fields were seen on either hand. Then came a flurry of snow and the sun vanished. Swallows were hawking round some lichen-gold barns, they seemed to care little for the snow.

Cotswold Cuckoo and Glittering Colne

I am staying in a dear old Cotswold village, one of the loveliest places in England. This morning a cuckoo awoke me; I heard it calling from the hanging woods where the rooks were busy about their nests. Standing on the top of the hill overlooking the trees, I could see right into the nests where the young rooks were being fed. The chestnuts were bursting their green-sheathed buds, down by the river the meadows were a bright emerald green. What a beautiful stream is the Colne! In Bibury I stole up to the old stone bridge and peeped over. Down in the clear waters that moved the dark fronds and cresses, showing the white chalk bed of the stream, two very large speckled trout hung poised in the current, mouths working and fins oaring ever so slightly. Their shadows were clearly defined on the white chalk below. This stream, though so shallow, gives one the impression of being deep because the bed is mostly hidden by the dark waying cresses which stir with the gentle current; one imagines monstrous trout inhabiting those moving forests.

A young fellow in plus fours was casting a stealthy fly, crouching along the green bank like a stalking cat. All the while the rooks kept up a continuous sleepy cawing, swallows twittered about the village street, and two butterflies were playing in the sunlight. Against the warm stone walls of the cottages the scarlet japonica spattered the gold stones with vivid spots of colour; a chiffchaff was calling at intervals in the gardens of Bibury Court.

The steep banks of the lanes are thickly splashed with primroses, and goldfinches flit about the little orchards. Their musical song is as musical as the waters of Colne in which they drink and bathe. In these villages there are no ugly houses, red brick is unknown and the eye is satisfied by the warm grey lichen-covered stones. I followed up the course of the Colne towards its source. I saw sights that made me yearn for my fly rod. Walking quietly up the bank of the stream I could see the trout lying up-current, small-headed, broad-girthed fish that seemed all that a good trout should be. But the Colne is a well-fished water and the trout are not easy to approach. I saw well-kept estates up these remote coombes, keepers in velveteens, yes, velveteens; I met the squire's bonny daughters out a-riding in the bright sunshine, and the old rector a-walking with a spaniel at heel. No—life has not changed in these quiet backwaters, perhaps it was because there was a notice: 'Not suitable for charabanc traffic.' I hope it never will be.

Wings over the Severn

Last week I was wandering about the Cotswolds, now I am in a different country: wooded valleys, grey stone houses, rather cold looking and bleak, and backward trees and hedges. Nevertheless, I had an enjoyable day or two between the showers. I am staying in a house which has a rookery just before the windows and soon after four the first sleepy 'caws' awake me, for I am a light sleeper. In the grey light of dawn the huge beech trees in the park loom up with their crowns thickly clustered with black nests, and this morning a white mist covered the ground. I took my host's two small boys nesting and in a bramble thicket I spied a ball of lichen shaped like a swarm of bees. It was a long-tailed tit's nest and contained two eggs; result—great excitement! Following up a lonely marshy coombe we put up a mallard, but though the place was ideal we could not find the nest. The morning, which began wet, turned out wonderfully hot, and all the birds awoke and set the steaming valley a-ring with song. Stepping over a hedge, Roger gave a yell and sprang back. A large snake was

curled round in the sun, fast asleep; I poked the coils gently and with a minute rasping rustle it melted into the ground ivy.

Turning for home, the stout Roger conducted me to an ash tree, and after his agitated, much-patched trousers struggled above me for some considerable time, he gained a fork about twenty feet up. Here, in a hole, was a little owl's nest and I was urged to come up and look. The years dropped away from me as I struggled, filling my eyes with bark. After all, do we ever grow up? I peeped into the dark hole, and there sat the mother owl, fixing me with baleful cat's eyes, her back beautifully spotted like some lovely moth.

In the afternoon I was hauled off to fish for trout. Under the mill weir some good fish were lying. I had a strong 'rug' at my second cast and for a fleeting moment the whole of my being thrilled to the feel of a struggling fish, then the line came slack. Standing thus, close to the mass of heavy water pouring over the sill in a thick yellow sheet, all other sounds were drowned; only the continual dull roar filled my ears, and afterwards, when I left the weir and fished up the stream, the sound of birds and the gentle winds in the willows seemed odd after the continued turmoil of waters.

To finish a varied day I flew over to Cardiff. I had seen the Bristol Channel from a distance and wondered what the shore was like, whether it was any good for fowling.

But the green fields cease abruptly in an odd manner, no marshes, no gullies. The tide was out, and below us lay the water like a crinkled sheet of silver paper. The pilot poked me in the ribs and pointed down. I saw a tiny match-stick two thousand feet below and realised with a slight shock that it was a lightship!

Coming home we throttled down and skimmed the trees. We passed over a wooded chasm and I could see the floor of the wood, leaf-strewn and tawny. Rooks fled off their nests and a mare went galloping across a field. The ploughman paused and looked upwards, a cottager shaded her eyes in a village back garden. And as the shadow of a bird on a sunny day passes over a warm hillside,

so our giant shadow flickered and swept over the green world below, swept with magnificent scorn the highest tree and hill.

Shadows in Fingle Gorge

A sweep of deep blue sky, woods already yellow-green with new leaves, the rushing murmur of water, and high, high above, towering crags streaked with tawny bracken, over which a buzzard wheels with outspread airy wings—all these things are fresh in my mind. Again, the thunder of hooves over firm green turf high above the world that seems to stretch misty and remote below and all around—riders ahead of me, galloping over the moor!

Since I arrived, the sun has shone with glorious brightness, making, with other things, my first visit to the moorland country of Devon a memorable one. I never dreamed such beauty could be found nearer than Scotland.

I fished a stretch of the Teign on Friday, but with little success, probably owing to the bright sun. The water was right, lightly coloured after the recent rains, yet the trout would not rise. But no matter, it was an experience to wander along the primrose-studded banks and see again the little smart waiter of a dipper bobbing at me from a stone under a mossy bank. To see, suddenly, a giant salmon rise like a great silver torpedo clean out of the water within a yard of my fly, that in itself was worth coming many miles to see.

My host had lost two salmon in these waters at the beginning of the week after playing each fish for some considerable time. I had one small trout which was not worth keeping, but even he gave me some fun. The Blue Upright went flicking out and was carried swiftly round under the near bank and then came a thrill down the line. In these waters there are some nice trout if the water is right; the week before, my friend had caught fifteen in one afternoon.

Towards evening I fished my way back up Fingle Gorge and saw the shadows stealing down the wooded slopes and lighting up the tops of the crags with a wonderful splendour. A redstart was

singing in the birch trees close to the water, and cuckoos called from the green trees. Soon four buzzards appeared high overhead and wheeled and wheeled again against the blue sky; eventually one lit on the top of a crag and surveyed the depths below. I was half tempted to climb the crags to search for a nest, but it was getting late and the light was dying.

And so home, through narrow emerald-green lanes studded with primroses, past little thatched cottages that seemed too good to be true.

After dinner I slipped on a pair of gum boots and, with my friend, went creeping up a green hill to snipe the rabbits that were out on their evening feed after the heat of the day.

Romany Ramble

Devonshire is so astonishingly beautiful in some places that I never cease to marvel at the fact that one can often wander all day without meeting a soul, and this holds good when a fair-sized town or village is close at hand.

It may be that most people keep to the roads and footpaths and have not the adventurous spirit of the true wanderer.

I think Hermione and I must have made an amusing pair had anyone seen us this morning, setting out for a ramble. She was carrying in one hand the cocker's lead, the end of which was attached to a very lively pup that insisted on celebrating the lovely spring morning by dancing round the May pole—the May pole being Hermione. I had a large rucksack on my back, filled with bottles (water), sausages, potatoes, and various other things, including a monster haddock that we intended to grill over a fire. First along the river—narrow, dark of hue and musical, loud in the shallows and swift, streaked with blue of the sky.

Everywhere the Lent lilies (wild daffodils) and of course rounded clumps of primroses, the flowers as big as florins. And here the chiffchaffs were in full song, never have I heard so many of these birds singing in so small a compass. I counted at least six of these birds within a hundred yards.

In places the willows had been felled, the raw cut stumps a vivid orange. The buds of some sallow bushes were a rare and beautiful tint, a misted lilac.

After a while we left the river and climbed a steep lane down which rattled a clear stream that had washed the stones until they looked like brilliant jewels. And soon we came to the old Dartmoor forest, with its twisted ancient oaks, hairy with grey lichen even to the twig tips; the trunks bearded too and fuzzy. Bracken was all about, still tawny. Seen from a distance these bracken-clad slopes are a soft tawny rose, most beautiful. The colouring of Devon in winter and spring is seen at its best; later, when the heather is in bloom and the bracken and the trees green, the effect is cheapened and is not nearly so pleasing; I have mentioned this fact before in relation to Scotland.

Soon we came to an old watch tower, the Belvedere, standing with its feet in the gorse—flowering now in its full glory and growing to the dignity of trees—and we dumped our packs and gear at the foot of the tower and climbed the spiral staircase. At the top we found a rusty bracket designed to hold a beacon, suggestive of impending danger hidden in the quiet hills, sleeping now in the sanctity of peace.

Then we went on down into the woods, searching the polished holly clumps for nests, and noting the tracks of wild ponies in the dark earth. We collected holly twigs and soon had our fire going merrily and the smell of the blue smoke was as sweet as flowers. The haddock was cut in twain and grilled, the sausages devoured, and then I lit my pipe and watched grey clouds scudding over the trees with great swiftness, while a blackbird warbled down by the river.

It was then that I was puzzled by the song of a bird I could not recognize. It was a surprisingly sweet song, reminding me sometimes of a nightingale, and again of a lark. Soon I saw the bird, about the size of a chaffinch, hopping about in the topmost branches of one of the oaks, but before I could get a closer view it flew away with a dipping flight.

Maybe it was a woodlark; this was the only bird that seemed to

answer to the description of the song. Then came the first drops of rain, darting their way through the twisted grey branches, and the blackbirds' warbling ceased. And when I looked at the fire—only a thread of blue wandered from the dead ash.

Moorland Riding

Perhaps there is no pleasure so great as that derived from riding over wild and interesting country, with a good horse under you, and the year at the threshold of summer. There seemed a sense of freedom in this grand country, an abundance of wild life, especially of birds, and the air so pure and with just a hint of the sea in it.

Four of us went rambling thus the other day, along ways that seemed quite remote. We threaded our way through little birch groves where one had to bend low over the saddle to avoid the whippy branches, past rugged bastions of grey rock poised one on the other in a seemingly precarious fashion, and so out on to the windswept high ground where the gorse was gold and the heather tangled. In places, green bogs gleamed wickedly verdant and the ground quaked beneath the horses' hooves, but these Devonshire-bred horses that are used to the moors avoid the really bad spots.

Bogs have an awful fascination for me, and one in particular that we passed seemed to invite closer inspection. I dismounted and threw a large stone right into the centre of the bright green herbage. It vanished with a horrid sound and the depths seemed fathomless. I could imagine that one would rapidly be sucked down in some of the moorland bogs and no trace be left.

Then we came to a long stretch of level, firm sward, and let the horses go. Squeak of leather, drum of flying hooves, and the sense of exaggerated speed that one gets when riding full out—how splendid it all was in the hot sunshine! Then, after the gallop, we pulled up and rested awhile in a little circular sweep of green sward where long ago an ancient castle stood.

I saw several holly blues in this district, the first I have ever seen. In the vicinity of Fingle Gorge many rare butterflies are found on the wooded slopes. Rooks were busy with their young

in the big sycamores growing on a steep slope, and, standing on the crest above, one could see right into the nests. Deer bounded away through the slender trees of a birch wood, tails erect and shadows dappling their coats.

Spring Twilight

Walking up the course of the brook which still runs, a clear stream despite the drought, the spaniel put up a mallard duck. I said to my companion, 'I will show you a duck's nest in a moment,' for I felt sure that there must be one there. Though it was an ideal situation—a flat, dry plateau of grass overhung with briars—I could find no trace save one or two scraps of down. All the same, I feel sure she means building in the vicinity, because I found a nest there last year.

Coming home up the meadows in the long spring twilight, a swallow went twittering over the surface of the green field. From every copse and wood blackbirds were softly warbling, and the water gleamed bright between the dark trees. Several half-grown rabbits have appeared at the bottom of the paddock, and in the evenings I see them steal out to feed. Despite the fact that they are youngsters they are as wily as old-timers, for during the week I have tried to stalk them with the .22 rifle. To-night I did have a shot at one of them. I waited behind a little hawthorn bush, already green, and after a while I saw two agitated red ears busily 'feeding' close to the hedge. Yet I fired and only cut a neat groove on the under edge of the upper bar of the gate that separated us. How curious it is that I always seem to aim high with a .22 rifle! It means that I must put in some practice at the targets. Very soon the warrens will be peopled with swarms of young rabbits and they will have to be killed off. Infant rabbit, jointed, and fried with bacon, is a tasty addition to the breakfast table.

Cotswold Journey

My wanderings are ended and the holiday over. I came back over the Cotswolds, where ever the breezes seem to sweep, and though

the air was still enough in the valleys, on the high ground it bent the strong grass blades until they glistened in the sunlight. I passed the Slaughters, deemed by many to be a perfect example of a Cotswold village, but I like Bibury better. Perhaps it was because soon after Cirencester the sun went in and a great black storm rose in a blue-black curtain behind the sunlit hills that ringed the far horizon.

As I came along I noticed the number of cuckoos by the roadside; no doubt they were 'nesting', like the majority of village boys I passed, homeward bound from school. Yet all the way I never saw a swift or a martin, nor did I hear a single whitethroat. Swallows there were aplenty about the grey old farm-steadings, indeed, some were collecting mud from the roadside puddles, but of the other summer visitors I neither saw nor heard a sign. Surely they must be late?

At this time of the year the garden changes daily, as do the fields and woods. About the lanes the blackthorn branches are laden under a white snow of blossom and even the may bushes are knotting up to bloom.



Chapter the Sixth

Green Earth Again

My journal for the next four months must necessarily be more in the nature of a natural history diary. Nevertheless, my single barrel—which weighs no more than a walking-stick—accompanies me on my rambles in the fields and woods. This little weapon is so well balanced that it is not irksome to carry, and my attention is concentrated on vermin, carrion crows, stoats, hawks and the like. Hieaway, the pools, wolds, and glebe land; all the dear familiar places which have been the scene of so many winter shootings have taken on a different guise, in the twinkling of an eye as it were. The rookeries are alive with bustle the length and breadth of the land, fields are a newer green, and any day now I look for swallows skimming over the pools.

While walking round yesterday I found the first thrush's nest with eggs. Though it is many years since I found my first thrush's egg, the sight of the clean blue, black-spotted eggs reposing in the mud cup is a never-failing source of joy. In the hedgerow oaks about here carrion crows build in great numbers—a little later I shall take toll of them. They seem to like the more remote trees, out in the valley meadows around the river.

When incubation has advanced they sit close and can be shot on the nest. I put up two mallard last night off the middle pool, a duck and a drake. They will nest there if I let them alone, but a vixen has an earth on the island and she may get the flappers. I found the remains of a wild fowl on the bank.

Forest Wanderings

This afternoon I visited Salcey forest and spent a long time wandering about on the look-out for birds and butterflies. In the

chequered sunlight speckled woods were flitting about, sunning themselves on the leaves of bramble growing on the edge of the rides. This butterfly is a beautiful insect and most handsomely marked. In this forest, which is mostly composed of oak trees, the purple emperor survives and I have seen him in July flying round the tops of the oaks, but so far have been unsuccessful in making a capture. Though it is early in the summer to find anything of note in the insect line, there was much to be seen. Grey squirrel were in evidence, both on the keeper's gibbets (which is the best place for him) and skipping about in the upper branches of the oaks.

I shoot grey squirrel whenever I can, and only the other day, whilst waiting for jays with my .22 in Wildwood, one ran up a tree close by my hide. It took a flying leap from one tree to another and had it missed its footing it would have fallen eighty feet or more. I had a shot at it and missed—they are difficult to shoot with a rifle—and it vanished mysteriously. About ten minutes later I heard it scolding from some sallow bushes behind me and I saw the rat-like head show for an instant between the fork. I fired and the little beast never moved. Puzzled, I waited, and then I saw my bullet had sped true. Slowly the whole body relaxed until it hung limp in the fork and I left it there as a warning to others of its kind.

Some long-tailed tits were busy in the blackthorns, and the beautiful lichen-bedecked nest made a lovely picture amid the ivory blossom and black interlacing twigs. These birds are becoming much more plentiful about here, a few years ago I scarcely found a nest. By the way, I have seen the goldfinches hanging about a plane tree in the garden where they built last year, and I fully believe they intend building there again.

Soon the slanting shadows lay across the ridges, rabbits hopped out from the green margins and began to feed in the springing lush grass. Near and far the birds were singing their vespers. Standing thus in the woods, I could hear the birds for miles around, so it seemed, and there was a continuous bubbling of whitethroats from the bramble thickets.

Summer Idleness

I am entering up this journal on my lawn, in the scent of new-mown grass, for one of the old villagers is scything the grass under the rose trees and the gardener is mowing the lawn. It is a perfect hot summer afternoon and I am just enjoying a quiet pipe under the cedar. Sitting thus, one sees many things. For instance, a goldcrest has been busy about the flat shady branches just above my head, gathering insects into a bundle and flying off to a nest that must be somewhere close by. Yet I have scanned the bough tips carefully and cannot locate it. These little birds are extremely rare here and I have not found a nest for years. Two chaffinches soon betrayed to me a nest in one of the cedar boughs, but it is too high to climb to. Swallows are continually passing up and down the tennis lawn below, and sweep the pool from end to end. This pool is in one corner of the lawn and holds some fine roach. A heron cleared it of goldfish last year, and I have not yet restocked it. But the swallows and martins love this bit of water and they are dipping the surface as they pass. Then they circle round me, as I sit under the tree, shaking and fluttering their feathers to get the water over their backs, and all the time they keep up a happy twittering that is like a running spring. That sound and the scent of the warm grass are almost lulling me to sleep.

A pair of goldfinches have been busy all the afternoon, flying to and from a little plane-tree on my drive and some may bushes in the paddock, but though I have searched the plane-tree carefully I cannot locate the nest. Why should they fly between these trees with such regularity? Perhaps it is that they find some special food on the breaking buds.

At about seven o'clock I have noticed some pigeon coming in from the arable fields on the other side of the valley, and as they usually pass over the corner of the garden, I have my gun handy in case one should pass over me. In the distance the woods have an enamelled quality, a sort of glaze that one only sees in summer

when there is not a cloud in the sky. Occasionally a roach will crinkle the surface of the pool and I catch a glimpse of passing shoals, their shadows following on the sandy floor, threading their way between the lily roots that are just breaking the surface. A venturesome perch is examining with minute care the crevices in the flagged stones that come down to the water's edge; now and then he sees a morsel between the stones and shoots forwards and returns as quickly to his original place, red fins working and tail fluttering.

7 p.m.—Two young rabbits have come out in the meadow; I can see them running and skipping about the nettle beds. They are too small to shoot or I would essay a stalk with the .22. The pigeon have just come in; I saw them cross the valley, but they were a long way off and out of their usual line and it seems doubtful if I shall get a shot at all.

Now the shadows are lying across the fields above the pools, a long string of red cattle come winding across and the herdsman is calling to them 'Coup! coup! coup!'—another dreamy sound backed by the twittering martins.

The Secret of the Goldfinches

I have found out why the goldfinches seem to be taking such an interest in the plane tree. During the bright days of the past week they have been flying to and fro with renewed zest, and I determined to make another search. It was not long before I spotted the nest, right at the end of a plane spray about twenty feet up. It seems no bigger than a golf ball, made of lichen. When the wind blows, the nest whips up and down so violently that I am sure the eggs must fall out. Surely the goldfinch is one of our most beautiful finches! When they fly, the outstretched wings seem like wheels of gold, the yellow feathers like spokes. Unfortunately they have rather a stumpy appearance, and though graceful enough in their movements, they are not prettily proportioned. The increase of this finch of late years is to be attributed not so much to protection, but to the state of the land. Farmers cannot look after their

land so well or keep the fields clean of thistles and weeds, hence the increase.

Urged by a friend's remarks on rabbit shooting, I took a handful of cartridges and strolled round the pools. My spaniel soon put out a half-grown rabbit and I missed with both barrels. I next drew the marsh with its willow jungles and peaty black soil; it is a green forest now. Dock and nettles are waist high in the soft ground and rabbits seem to like to lie under the former. A rabbit soon bolted after the spaniel went in, and rolled over to my shot at forty yards. It was not a youngster but a very old doe, expecting, what the Press calls an 'interesting event', and I was sorry I had taken her life.

The only safe way at this time of year is to stalk the youngsters with the rifle, and by this means one can pick one's rabbit.

I have not heard a cuckoo for two weeks now. We had a few earlier on but they seem to have passed elsewhere.

As I came back past the lower pool a large pike was lying just clear of a lily bed in about five feet of water. I stood watching it a long time and it never seemed to move a fin. Then I was aware that it had begun to move, but with the leisure of a liner leaving dock: Slowly it turned about, the sun shone down and barred his back and I could see his wicked shoe-shaped mouth and cruel eye. Then there was a swirl and he vanished like a ghost. The quickness of pike is amazing; at times they seem to go with the speed of an express train, especially when alarmed.

May Frost

I am sure that the majority of wildfowlers will be conjuring up visions of geese this arctic weather, certainly I remember nothing like it before. Last night I noticed the leaves of the horse-chestnut hanging limp and shrivelled, and the roadside herbage was also looking half dead. The tall, sturdy stalks of the hedge parsley were no longer erect and lush, but drooping at the tips with heads hanging down. All the mown lawns I have seen lately have gone

quite dead and yellow; so different to the shaven sweeps of green that we saw a few days back.

I found the first bullfinches' nest to-night in a roadside hedge. They are especially fond of the blackthorn thickets, and where the undergrowth is composed in a greater part of box—as in Hieaway—these birds are usually found. And I think this particular British finch is hard to beat for beauty of colouring. A retiring bird, appearing to like the cover of the woods and leaves, it is not often seen in the open country.

To turn to another subject, I have been trying out the .22 at rabbit these latter evenings, but I must confess that the .22 is not a good weapon for this type of shooting. Unless the rabbit is hit through the heart, instant death is rare.

With a well directed shot from the twelve-bore, a rabbit is knocked completely out, and I do like to make a clean kill. What is rather puzzling to me is that this rifle is so deadly for pigeon, and in nine cases out of ten the bird is killed instantly. When shooting a pigeon with a twelve-bore, I have often failed to kill outright.

The Quail in the Corn

I seem to have seen two interesting things lately. The other night I was stalking some rabbits on their evening feed in a field of springing corn. I was crawling up a slope and suddenly heard a most curious sound close by. I was mystified at first by this weird, liquid call and I puzzled long in my mind what it could be. Then it suddenly occurred to me that the sound was very like the call note of a quail. Sure enough, a few minutes later, two quail started from the green corn and ran at a great pace away from me up the hill, still calling. I have only once before seen quail and then at some distance (actually I found the nest) and this was the first occasion I had seen a wild one close at hand. It appeared a very minute bird, almost like a partridge 'cheeper'.

The other rarity was a hoodie. This bird flew out of some oaks close by Wildwood and I had a close view. What was this species

doing so far inland and at this time of the year? I have never seen one before in this part of the world, though, of course, on my fowling expeditions to the east coast, I have many times seen them at close quarters. On the Wash marshes in January they are tolerably common, though incredibly wary, and seem to have a sharper sight than wild geese.

Now the wintry spell seems to have passed and at last true summer is ushered in. On my way to Cambridge yesterday, the breeze caressed the grass fields so that they seemed like stretches of water. In the strong sunlight the blades of the mowing grass bent shining under the passing breeze until the whole surface of the meadow seemed alive and creeping.

Under the elms cattle were grouped with swishing tails, and the golden buttercups were a feast of colour. In some villages cricket was in progress and the white figures made a vivid contrast against the background of green.

Then at last I reached Cambridge and was sitting in the quiet seclusion of a college room overlooking the green quad. An undergraduate passed across a flagged pathway and vanished into a carved doorway, two bottles of beer reverently borne in either hand. There is the memory of an excellent pint at the Buttery and the contrast of sunlight and shadow along a cloistered court. Distant bells tolling, a sense of an almost monastic peace.

Sniping Rabbits

As soon as I dare to decide that the summer weather is here, it immediately departs, and I am writing this on an evening more like November than May. I have just been round with the rifle and spaniel and returned with several nice young rabbits. I find the best method of shooting with a .22 rifle is rather in the manner one employs with a revolver. I like to find the target in the peep sight and then bring the rifle up to the mark again, firing while the rifle is moving. Just as the rabbit's ears appear through the peep sight I press the trigger, and with this method I find I am having great success. My old way of aiming and trying to keep a

steady arm was not nearly so successful. I have employed this same method with young rooks and find that it is just as deadly as when shooting at rabbits on the ground.

The other evening I was walking down a ploughed field on the other side of the valley. There were several rabbits running about at the lower end, about two hundred yards distant. I stalked them and then lay down on the ground to try a long shot. With anything over a hundred I have found the standing method unsatisfactory. There were two rabbits together, jumping round one another, and I aimed at the left-hand target. The range was about ninety odd yards and the light was failing. But I took careful aim and had the satisfaction of seeing a nice clean hit with my rabbit lying in the dust where the bullet had cut the dry soil.

Summer's Glory

In a few days the country has altered. Those living in the towns must indeed envy their country cousins this lovely weather. The byways and country roads are flanked by white hedge-parsley which grows in places waist high, and in the thick green of the hedgerows, amidst the tangle of sweet briar, the whitethroat bubbles all the day through. The song reminds one of a cascade of fresh water that chuckles down between mossy stones; it is as powerful and full of vigour at the end of the song as at the beginning. When evening comes, the rabbits troop out in numbers along the paddock side, only their pink ear-tips quiver above the grass blades as they feed, and down the village street the swifts speed, screaming all together and shooting like sooty arrows over the grey stone roofs and ivy-clad square tower.

In the squire's garden, along the mossy walls of cool walks, wisteria coils its fragrant exotic tassels, which mingle the fragrance of their bloom with the scent of lilac. In this quiet hour of rustic peace the pheasants come out from the shrubberies and tread delicately about the shaven lawns, and from the elm-studded park beyond the sunken fence, there comes the sound of bat on ball as the local team puts in some useful work at the wicket. Most of the

players wear spotless flannels, and the white-clad figures show vividly ever and again as they pass behind the trees. And on the weathered seat beneath the great hollow oak sit the village ancients, smoking their pipes and mumbling in their beards, happy as old spaniels that like the sunny side of the wall. Later, when the game is ended, all will adjourn to the local inn where the brown ale will flow. But still the swifts will go hawking above the village, far into the warm night and after the last light in the hamlet has been extinguished. In this place life has little changed and thank heaven for it, say I! And those whose lot it is to live in such a locality must realize their good fortune.

The most outstanding note of real interest I have to mention is a flock of fifteen black terns I saw pass over the road near Nazeby battlefield this last week. They were on migration, but I have never seen such a rare bird flocking together in this fashion. They were flying due east and very low, just skimming over the hedges. Several passed over my car, about ten feet up, so there was no mistake about identification.

Nightingales are Friendly

During the week I had occasion to go to L——n by car and in the lovely Princethorpe woods I stopped for lunch. Hardly had we got the things out of the car when a nightingale burst into song close by, and, in a short while, he appeared on a little aspen about twenty yards away. Here he sang in full view for the best part of half an hour, when, becoming interested in these invaders of his leafy retreat, he decided to investigate further and so came up behind us, within twenty feet, and peeped at us from behind a bush. It is the first time I have seen a nightingale at close quarters and was struck with the robin-like movements and the full eye. The glade before us was bathed in sunlight, and large brimstones flitted past enjoying the warmth. I lay back in the springing grass and watched the glorious sky of deepest blue against which great billowy clouds glided serenely across. On every hand the birds were in full song; our nightingale, thrushes, blackbirds, and

willow warblers whose gentle sleepy murmuring song is the very voice of summer in England. Chiffchaffs, too, were adding to the concert and it seemed that only the cuckoo's call was absent from this choir of many glad voices.

Trials of a Stickleback

I was amused to watch a flycatcher this evening making a fine meal of gnats that danced in a dense cloud in the evening sun. It sat on a branch of a tree close by and every moment would make a sally and gather several of the dancing flies. It repeated this performance until the cloud of insects was nearly all devoured. It is a strange thing that creatures in their wild state never seem to overeat themselves, and certainly young birds seem to have unquenchable appetites.

The other night I was walking by the pool in my garden, which I had made some years ago, and stocked with roach. I suddenly saw a roach of quite a pound in weight busy feeding off the floating flies that dropped on the surface of the water. I had no idea a fish of this size existed in the pond, and it must have been one of those I put in six or seven years ago. This same pool is swarming with sticklebacks, and I have spotted several nests with their attendant guards in the shape of the brightly-clad male fish who allow no other fish or beetles near. I was most amused at several water snails which would insist on clambering over the minute structure. The cock fish got very 'hot and bothered' and grabbed each snail by the scruff of the neck and hurled it on one side. If one keeps one's eyes open there are all sorts of interesting things to be seen.

A Reverie—The Great Selby

A few months ago I was sitting in my fowling quarters up at Holy Island, reading Abel Chapman's book *The Borders and Beyond*. I had been out shooting all day and was thankful to rest awhile by the side of the roaring fire with a pipe between my teeth and this great volume on my knee.

My companion was asleep, sleeping the sleep of the tired hunter, and his snores filled the warm little room with monotonous regularity. But slumber was far from me for I was living again with Chapman that wild winter's day when he and Selby were struggling to reach the shore in the great gale. It was touch and go, and for hours they battled with the storm before they reached the shore hard by the very house where I was now staying. Great days those must have been and great men, too; men after my heart.

The book was closed and rested on my knee as I looked into the fire and speculated on the passing of time. Would that I could have met Chapman himself, aye, and the valiant Selby too! Truly we are sojourners here for a short while only, and long after we are out of mind the wigeon will be calling out on the lonely oozes even as they were to-night.

Yet these men, thought I, they must have lived a fine life, finding this world a wonderful place despite its worries and its trials. Truly we who have the hunting instinct, find an immeasurable pleasure in life in general—that is if we can still find the time to shoot now and then. Wildfowling satisfies the hunting instinct more than any other form of shooting, with perhaps the exception of deer stalking or moose hunting.

Heavy steps outside my door suggested my landlord, and I asked him in to chat a while about the old days. Mr. S—— is a fine man and has many a tale to tell of the sport of this part of the coast, for he has been here many years. 'I was just reading of Selby and Abel Chapman,' said I, 'do you remember them?' Of course he remembered them, but Selby was still alive, he lived on the Island and was not only alive but could hold a gun straight and get his bird too!

This was amazing news. To me Selby had become almost a legendary figure and all this seemed too good to be true.

The following day I and my friend crossed over to Holy Island and through the courtesy of Mr. Fleming of Berwick I was introduced to the great Selby himself. I found him exactly as he

appears in the photos in Abel Chapman's book—the same white beard, the same alert bearing. I seemed to be living in another century and could not believe that I was really talking to the man who uttered those classic words recounted in *The Borders and Beyond*. Chapman had come down to the punt one bitter winter's day with an armful of straw. 'I see', said Selby, 'you're one of them hothouse plants!'

How right it all seemed, the icy wind, the flying flakes, this fine old man still so hale and hearty. Yes, he remembered all the incidents of the past, the great days such as come so seldom to the fowler, when the big gun booms over the slob lands and a lane is cut in the ranks of rising geese. He remembered the mighty gale when he and Chapman so nearly lost their lives, the day so many gallant fisher folk were drowned, when almost the entire male population of two coastal villages was wiped out.

I said farewell to the old man and he went back to his warm fireside. The Holy Islanders are indeed a hardy race of men with a dignity withal which commands respect.

As a sporting centre, Holy Island is, in my opinion, far too overshot and its great days are over. It still holds attraction for me because of its fowling history—all the great names in fowling history have shot there with the exception, perhaps, of Colonel Hawker; I cannot find any record of his being there, but Payne-Gallwey, Chapman and Millais knew it in the days of its glory.

The coming of the car has been the ruin of it, and now the brent get no peace. There are far too many punts. Fenham flats cannot support more than two punts and now there are double that number, so an old fowler told me. This district is primarily a punters' hunting ground, as salt marshes are practically non-existent. Clever and experienced gunners do, however, manage to make good bags occasionally with the shoulder gun, but those days are becoming rare.

I told Selby of my success with the grey geese and he was deeply interested.

When we crossed to the mainland the snow was falling thickly,

and that night I walked up the coast on the lookout for wigeon. For a fleeting second the old glamour of past days seemed to be recaptured as I stood alone amid the flying flakes. 'Whee-o, whee-o.' I heard the voice of the packs out on the muds and a tiny orange light burned on the distant blur of Holy Island. The night was alive with brushing wings and a solitary goose was calling in the snowy darkness. And I thought of the grand old men and the good old days which are no more. Selby is the last link with the long ago and all that it stood for; a fine, manly sport on a once wild and desolate coast.

Bird Mortality

Out of six bullfinches' nests I have found with eggs this last week, all but one have been robbed by vermin. All the finches' nests in my garden, five in all, have likewise been robbed. Some of the bullfinches' nests were in extremely thick and almost impenetrable cover, yet they have suffered just the same. The one remaining nest, which contains young of about ten days old, is situated in a thin hedge bordering a road, down which traffic is constantly passing, and this keeps the feathered and furred vermin away. Perhaps its greatest danger lies in village lads, for this road is a favourite Sunday walk.

This gives one some idea of the percentage of wild birds which are destroyed before they leave the nest. No fewer than twenty-seven bullfinches destroyed and twenty-five finches, chaffinches, linnets and goldfinches; fifty-two birds in all. It represents roughly the death roll (finches only) in barely six acres of country; imagine then what the grand total of wild bird fatalities must be over the whole of England. I leave some mathematician to work it out!

Two jackdaws were hunting the cedar for nests early this morning and I made a pretty right and left at them as they flew past the window. The second shot was a very long one and I thought I had missed. The jackdaw flew on for a few yards, then seemed to falter in the air. A minute later he pitched stone dead in

the meadow. I was shooting through the small aperture of the window, so I had not much room to 'follow through'.

Notice how the trees and hedges are losing their fresh greens—already the wayside vegetation has assumed the dark, dusty hue that is almost a feature of July. The birds, too, have fallen silent, though in the early mornings the songthrush still sings for a brief period.

The pools are getting lower every day, and round the base of the island is a foot or so of shingle which is usually well below water level. I see no duck about, though there may be a nest in the upper marsh. The vegetation is so thick that it is impossible to search.

Evening Ambush with a .22

I found, this evening, the nest of a garden warbler in some thick shrubs in the nut walk. This shy and retiring bird is not common and I had no idea a pair were in my garden because I had not seen or heard either the cock or hen. There were four eggs in the nest, and beautifully marked specimens too. The hen sat so close I had almost to push her off, and then she hopped anxiously round, scolding in a surprisingly robust voice for so small a bird.

There are some nice half-grown rabbits about now, but they seem to be as difficult to stalk as full-grown 'cottontails'. Knowing that there were two in a bed of nettles down the paddock—for I had seen them at feed for some evenings past—I ambushed in some thick nut bushes about fifty yards distant. Waiting for them to appear would have been a tedious business for a great many people, but the time was crammed with interest. In the space of half an hour I had found at least four nests without moving from my position, simply by watching the parent birds. Wasps' nests may be found by noting their lines of flight.

A wren had its young in the cleft of an old yew growing in the garden, and a blue tit also had young in the old nut walk wall. Goldcrests were seen with something in their bills and they undoubtedly have a nest in the yew also. Soon a young thrush, its

spotted breast suffused with a lovely primrose hue that is only found in the young of the species, came and perched on the fallen branch of a crab apple and for a long time sat watching me intently with its boot-button eye.

Every now and then I glanced down the slope past the nettle jungle to see if the rabbits had appeared, but the golden minutes went dragging on. A cuckoo flew past pursued by swallows and their twittering protestations died away over the meadows. I began to feel cramped and eased the rifle butt in my shoulder. At the slight movement two pink ears poked from the nettles on the margin of the pool and, looking intently, I could just make out the form of the head and one watchful eye. I was in the act of edging the rifle into alignment when the rabbit (a beautiful half-grown one) hopped out with another large old buck in pursuit. They hopped round one another sparring like hares, and the rifle came into alignment as the scrap ceased. The younger rabbit presented a fine clear shot as it sat on a patch of sun-baked earth. A second's tension and the rifle cracked. A cloud of thick dust arose which obscured everything, but when it slowly cleared I saw my bullet had sped too low. They did not show up again.

As twilight fell, a pigeon passed over my head and landed in the American oak behind. I could see it looking about, outlined amid the black leaves, but in moving my position for a shot I lost it, and though I stalked carefully until I was right underneath the tree I never saw it again, nor did I hear it leave.

The Starling Harvest

Those who are so fortunate as to live in the country at this time of year will have noticed the numbers of young starling abroad in the fields and woods. The first week in June is always characterized by the sound of the young birds as they follow their parents. From early morning until late at night, the hungry mouths are always requiring to be filled. The white hawthorn blossom shakes and the drab brown of their immature plumage shows darkly amid the white petals as they hop from twig to twig.

In the woods and hedgerow bottoms the summer growth rises nearly waist high; champions (ragged robins), willow herb, hedge parsley, all the lush plants that make the evening air so fragrant, seem to demonstrate the lavish hand of Nature and to suggest those forces that lie within the earth.

• This past week I have been bird-watching on a large sheet of water near here. I found three reed buntings' nests in a very short space of time, two nests containing young. Some anxious red-shanks (how their pipings made me long for the marshes!) refused to betray their secret, but a shoveller's nest was discovered. It contained seven eggs. A little later two black terns flew by, hawking along above the surface of the water. Every year round about this time an odd specimen visits here, though they stay only a day or so and then go on. A pair of whinchats managed to keep their secret, though I was very 'hot' at times, and a yellow wag-tail also refused to give away any information.

As to shooting, I have not had a gun in my hands all the week, though there is a carrion's nest containing young that needs a visit in the near future.

Water Spell

I have noticed lately, especially in the early evenings, the numbers of pigeon which frequent the springing cornfields about here. They are present in enormous flocks, almost as large as the winter hordes, and are doing no little damage. I watched them this evening, dropping down into the middle of a large field. The corn hid them as soon as they settled and one would never have guessed so large a flock was feeding in so small an area. I tried to get at them but found it difficult to see them even when tolerably close, and as I only carried my rifle I had to wait for a clear shot. After a while, however, one large grey portly bird waddled into a more open area of the field, where the corn was not so high, and, lying down, I put a bullet through his neck at above fifty yards range.

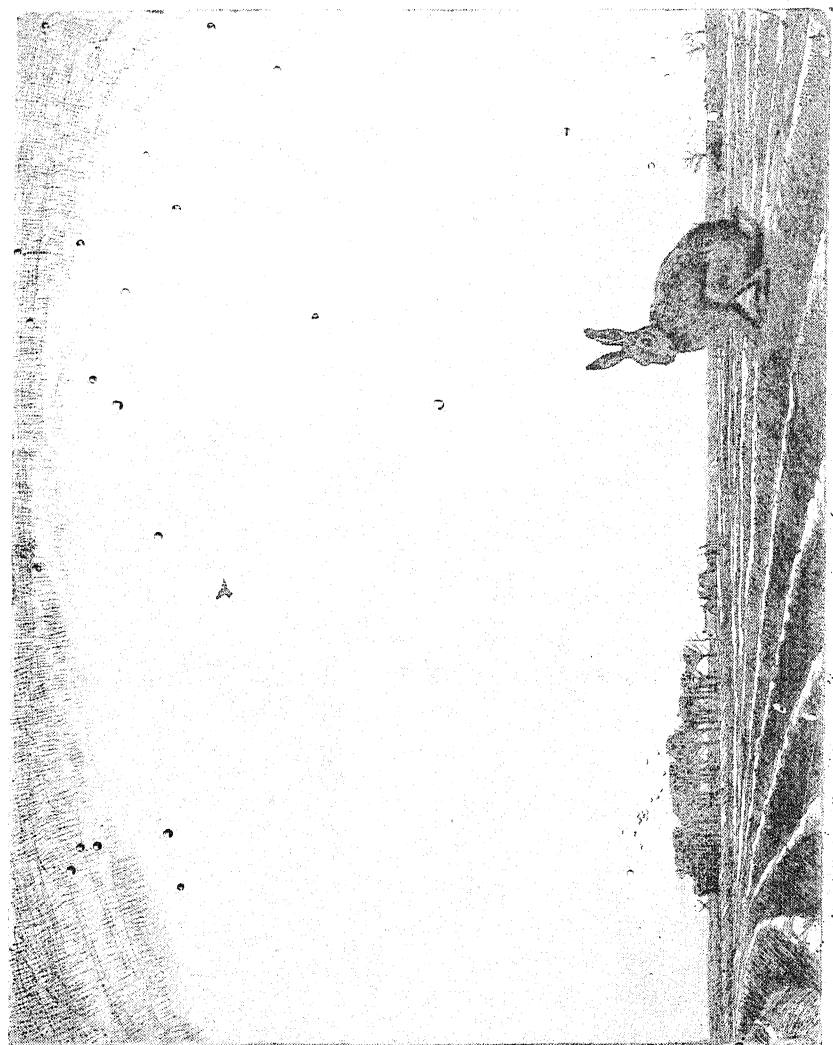
It is amusing to watch the fish in my water garden. I have made a little watermill, complete with wheel and miller's garden, and

the water flows through a cement mill dam and turns the under-shot wheel. Where the rill flows from under the paddles, sticklebacks and perch love to lie of an evening, and so do the roach. Lying quietly on the bank one can see the latter cruising round the mill pool, which is only four yards across but quite deep. Every now and then one will suck down a fly or other small insects that have been carried down the stream. Of all the goldfish, only one survives, and since the day the heron cleared the others out, I have not felt like replacing them. The 'wild' fish are more inconspicuous and can hide themselves under the lily pads. Very soon now the blue dragonflies will be busy about this stream and a pretty sight they are as they dart hither and thither or rest upon a flag. Water in a garden is a most attractive feature and always abounds with interest. Occasionally moorhens venture up from the pools and feed about the stream, but they have never learnt to become tame. Grass snakes love this bit of garden, and I sometimes see them swimming in the larger lily pond.

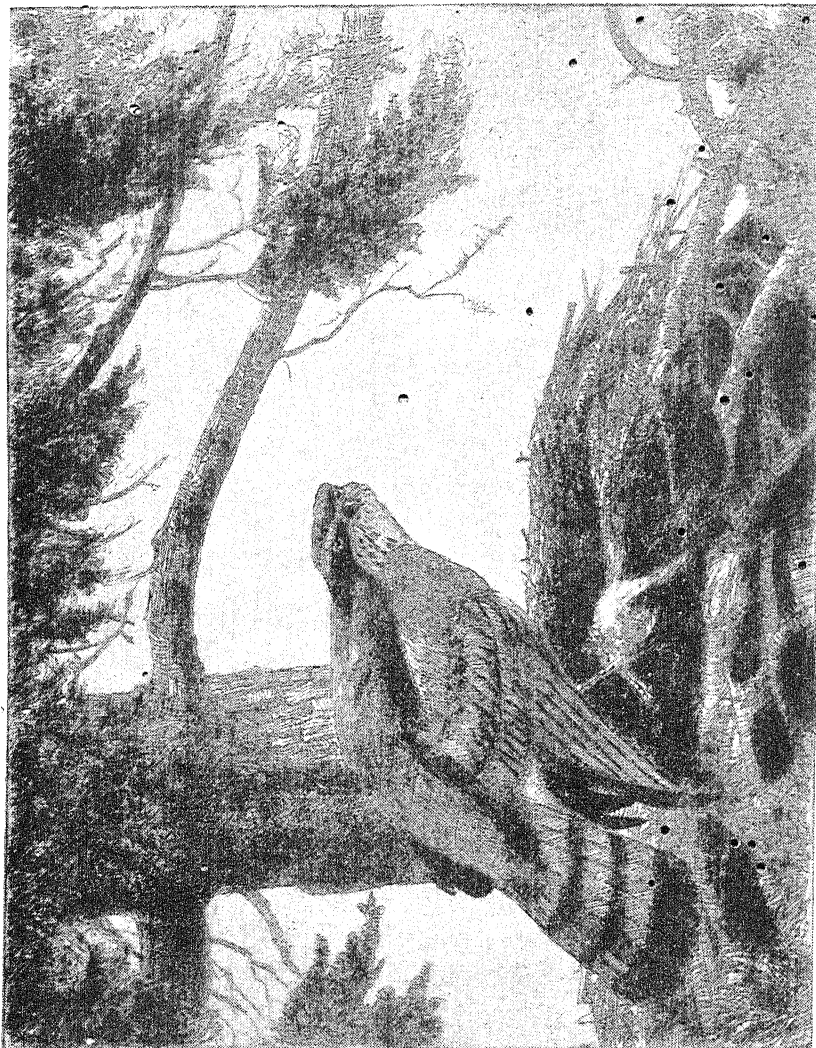
Still Life Study

What a shame it is that at such a beautiful time of the year, the most perfect month of the year in fact, we should have such dreadful weather! Yet the hedges have never been so weighed down with may; they are literally snowed under with blossom and the air is almost rank with the scent down some of the lanes.

I was down by the river this afternoon, making a sketch of a particularly beautiful group of trees leaning over the water. It was overcast and thundery, and, as I worked, swifts shot past my head within an inch or two. So close did they flash I could feel the rush of displaced air. Along the river side, cattle stood knee-deep in the lush grass, and sedge birds chattered from a clump of graceful reeds. Every now and then a lusty chub would roll on the surface as he took a floating fly (there was a big hatch of May fly), and I longed for my little whippy rod. Clusters of cow-parsley leant over the smooth water and its dirty white bloom was reflected brokenly in the shifting stream. But the most beautiful thing I



English Earth



Sparrow-hawk at Nest

saw was a pied wagtail sitting on the branch of a fallen willow, his silvery-white and black head set off by the grey-green tones of the surrounding reeds on the river's bank.

An Accurate Rifle

I took a rifle this evening and went down the meadows towards the river. I did not particularly want to go, but the spaniel insisted we should, and when he entreats there is no resisting him. His persuasive powers are extraordinary and he knows every move of the game. When I am stalking a rabbit, he sticks to me like a shadow, stopping when I stop and crouching when I crouch.

The mowing grass was wet to the legs and I was glad of my waders. Not far from the paddock fence I caught sight of a nice youngster feeding about eighty yards distant. I did a short stalk and then, standing up, took a shot. It was a good kill and the rabbit lay without movement. A little farther on I came to the angle of a hedge which overlooked a small meadow. On the far side I saw a rabbit sitting in the hedge, about sixty yards distant. I rested the rifle in a convenient crutch and after a little difficulty got a clear view. 'Crack' and then followed the dull thud of a hit. The rabbit, however, had vanished and I feared that it had fallen down its bury. The spaniel rushed forward and a moment later I saw him standing over it. It was lying on the very lip of the hole. A lucky shot had pierced the heart and, like the first, it had been killed instantaneously. There is great joy in using an accurate rifle and one comes to take pride in the weapon itself. I always keep it scrupulously clean and never allow it to remain long without a good oiling in every part.

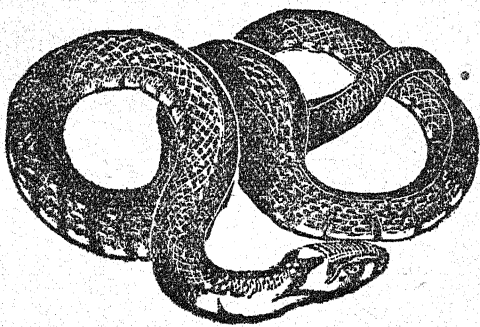
Summer Thunder

A heavy silence broods over the mowing grass, broken only by the grumbling of a great velvet bee hunting a sweet-smelling grass bank close at hand. Over the distant trees a curious mist is hanging and the air is heavy with thunder; even now it is muttering far away over the hills. Before me I can see the meadow

sloping away, then rising steeply to where the cornfields begin at the top of the crest. Nettles grow on this far slope and at the moment a partridge is calling. I can see it standing beside a big clump.

At the foot of the slope, two rabbits are feeding by a gateway; one is hopping across the sun-baked earth and now is almost lost in the thick grass.

Two days ago I happened to glance out of the window and saw a grey squirrel sitting up under the cedar on the lawn. This little beggar has robbed at least three nests in the garden to my knowledge, and its time had come. I slipped to the gun-room and got my rifle, and, standing well back in the room (the window was open), I fired and killed it.



Chapter the Seventh

Nightingale Time

When the dog roses transform the hedges and make every lane a garden, then is the time to be in the countryside of England.

And yet all this glory is wasted on so many of us. Is money and moneymaking all that matters? Cannot we see what we are missing in this precious, all too short life of ours? Towns only exist because people want to make money; they are hideous things, dusty warrens, stinking of man, his meanness and evil. What must the smell of a town be like to a sensitive wild animal?

I remember once when I returned from a sea voyage—I had been on a sailing ship—we came into harbour in the dusk of a hot summer night. And then we smelt the town, all kinds of horrid smells; cheap scent, sweat, dust, refuse and smoke. After the pure air of mid-sea it was suffocating, yet within an hour of landing we could trace no difference in the atmosphere.

Late this evening I went up to Wilderness Lane to listen to the nightingale. As I walked along I came to areas of heated air, sickly with honeysuckle scent and dog-rose. Walking on a few paces the air became cold again, with different smells of growing and blossoming things. As when one is swimming the water suddenly changes temperature, so I noticed did the air, as it lay between the steep hedges of the dusty lane. And very soon heard the nightingale, and another answered it from the wilderness of dog-rose. Other birds were singing too, even at this hour; a far songthrush, and a blackbird warbling quietly to himself. But those two lovely voices took hold of the scented night and made it rapturous.

In a few days the tide will have turned and will be flowing back

within the earth, but these weeks, when the nightingale sings, are the most precious in the year. Now the radio has brought the nightingale into our own homes, but most people chafe while it is broadcast and long to get back to jazz music.

I am not at all sure, for all our boastings and struttings, that we are such fine creatures as we think ourselves to be. Birds, of all living things, are surely the most beautiful. Like lovely thoughts they roam about the world, as pure as the winds that bear them. Take heed then lest our values be wrong; the Creator, God, Life, call it what you will, may not think that man is such a lovely thought in the scheme of things.

Birds know supreme joy. Watch a starling on a frosty winter's morning singing on a tree-top. See his wings open and wag to help his hymn of praise, he at least is thankful for the gift of life. And where do most of us find joy? In the open air, in the study of living things? No, the doings of our fellow mortals interest us far more!

Canal Banks

Grey skies once more and northerly unkind winds! The cuckoo has arrived, though he seldom calls, and he must think that he has come too soon. Every evening I hear one at the bottom of the home paddock, where I have reason to believe he roosts in a dense little may tree. This afternoon I watched a man catch quite a decent trout in a small pool adjoining the Grand Junction Canal. This pool, which is some eighty yards long by ninety wide, holds some fine fish despite its size, and the owner has some good sport there, the fish running up to three pounds in weight. This only goes to show what one can do, even in a small place, if one stocks it well and preserves the fishing.

Writing of canals reminds me what good places canal embankments are for birds, especially if thorn bushes are growing up the sides. Such a locality seems to have a great attraction for bullfinches and yellowhammers, though why this should be so is hard to say.

I am having great trouble with my spaniel's ears. He has developed a canker in the left ear and though two vets have seen him and I have tried numberless well-known powders I cannot cure the trouble. The trouble dates from the time he was washed by the gardener in hot water and floor stain. The man thought the stain was carbolic soap and when the wretched beast emerged from the bath his white hair was a rich brown!

Buttercup Blaze

A jackdaw's 'caw' awoke me early yesterday morning and there was a skirmish going on in the plane tree on the drive. It never occurred to me that the goldfinches were in danger, but later, when I went out to see, the nest was awry and the eggs strewn, broken, beneath the tree. Therefore it was with great delight that later, hearing a goldfinch singing in the garden, I went out to the cedar and found another nest at the top of a spray about fifteen feet up. It contained one egg.

This evening I walked down the meadow to the pools. Those readers who may have followed my wanderings through the year must, I think, have formed some mental image of the places which I describe, but it is hard for me to recognize the pools these summer days. The grass is knee-high and ablaze with buttercups, and the marsh is an impenetrable jungle through which only a scolding whitethroat slips.

And Hicaway, where in the winter I have ambushed the pigeon at twilight, is hardly to be recognized now.

The entrance to the main ride is choked with luxuriant summer herbage through which I had to force my way. Up on the crown of the sandy hill, where the pines grow, I found a sparrow-hawk's nest with fully fledged young within. When I climbed the tree they all took wing save one, which crashed into the thick box bushes. I could not find it, though I searched for some time, and it must have crept away into some hole, for rabbits are numerous here.

As evening fell, I heard the lovely mature notes of the night-

ingale from the dense thorn thickets at the lower end of the wood, and for a long time I stood listening. Then I went down the ride to find its nest. The singing stopped as I approached and the alarm note began. The alarm note of the nightingale reminds me of that of the winchat, save that it is more plaintive and more drawn-out. If you listen carefully you can hear a deep 'churring' purr at the end. I searched in vain.

When I came silently out of the wood, scores of rabbits were feeding in the quiet of the evening, some almost hidden by the long grass. Beyond the cool shade thrown on the sward by the trees, the valley lay bathed in soft sunlight, and the air was heavy with the scent of may. A nice half-grown youngster emerged from the hedge not far away, pursued by an old buck.

After I had fired, the rabbits vanished like lightning, only the faint, keen reek of powder hung in the air, mingling with the scent of the may. The grass was so long that it was a little time before I spied the dead rabbit lying deep in the buttercups. Looking closely at it as it lay there, I saw the minute black fleas swarming up its pads into the grass like rats deserting a sinking ship.

Secret Summermoon and Shadowed Rides

A grey squirrel has had the goldfinches' eggs out of the nest in the cedar tree. He came in the early morning, scorning the dummy gunner I had set beneath the tree to guard the nest. When I climbed to, it this evening I found two young, dead in the nest, and the whole structure pulled out, so this is the second time these brave little birds have had their nest destroyed. The squirrel has been seen by several people, and when we meet I shall have a score to pay.

• There is another wood which attracts me almost as much as Hiaway, not only because rare butterflies and birds are to be found there, but also because of its peculiarly beautiful and suggestive name—Summermoon wood. In these hot June days the white admiral flits about the hazel thickets (most of the under-

wood is hazel) and anyone who has not seen this lovely butterfly has missed a great treat.

Nearly all the trees in Summermoon are oaks, for it was once part of the great—and still extensive—forest of Salcey. One hot afternoon of last year I saw a purple emperor flitting around a tall oak, the only specimen of this regal insect I have ever seen there.

Try how you will you will never find Summermoon unless you live close by. To reach it you must leave the main road and skirt a large cornfield. This walk on a hot day is purgatory, for the earth is blistering to the foot along the headland and the only shade, a few scanty dusty ash trees. In these ashes I have had many a score of pigeon at harvest time, for they rest there before dropping down on to the sheaves.

But at last the long hot walk is over. Round a shoulder of a green hill the wood bursts upon the view, its bounding hedges white and faintly rank with the flat plates of the alder blossom. Here hundreds of young starlings were calling this afternoon, and even the surrounding fields were full of them.

The entrance to the wood is a small barred gate, and it is seldom anyone lifts the latch. I see in the hard caked soil at the entrance the marks of horses' hooves, memories of a good day after Reynard when the year was young! Then, going up to the gate, I peep over and see a green lane flanked by thick bushes and over-arched with trees. Down that path there is a green twilight, an underwater greenish light, and a rabbit sits bolt upright in the track.

Farther down one comes upon an open glade where the tender pink spires of willow herb rise up gracefully and still. This is the place for uncommon woodland butterflies, and green woodpeckers are ever busy about the hot ant hills. There is little shade out in the clearing and once I saw an adder basking on some wood chips at this spot.

The handsome silver-washed fritillary is always there in season, sucking the sweet nectar from the blackberry blossoms. These days of June help one through half the year and one can look

gratefully back to recollections of the scent of mown hay, lime trees, dog-roses, and the memory of a white admiral flitting down a green glade in Summermoon.

Forest Benediction

After waiting until midsummer, summer proper has at last arrived and the cold and wet weather is forgotten. Climatic change affects us more than we think, and in this lovely weather, life in general takes on a different aspect. Hot weather to the town dweller is not always welcome, but to the countryman it brings a sense of abiding peace and beauty.

This evening I went to Wildwood, for I knew it would be cool down by the water. I lay on my back in the tall lush grass and looked up through the openings in the oak leaves to the mosaic of fathomless blue beyond. Now and again swifts would pass across these blue fragments, flying so high as to be scarcely discernible. And up amidst the topmost oak branches the sun made a golden glory of the leaves, while lower down, where I was lying, all was cool shade. In the windless air of the glade many sweet scents were blended into an exquisite fragrance . . . pine trees mixed with willow herb, crushed nettles, growing grass; the exhalation of millions of young plants after the heat of the day. And the woods were not silent, for the birds are not hushed as yet, they do not feel the approach of summer's end and hard times.

The belief that wild birds cease to sing later because they are too occupied with domestic cares is incorrect. Their busy time is past and passing now. It is the joy of life that makes the birds sing and they find pleasure in the propagation of their kind. As I lay there I began to count the numbers of birds I could hear. Songthrush, blackbird, willow wren, wood-pigeon, jay (hardly a song!), whitethroat and garden warbler. Then, striking a sad note in the woodland music, there came the wistful lilt of a robin. And suddenly, with that falling cascade of tender notes, there came a memory of autumns past; autumn in the city when the Hyde Park chestnuts are showing gold, and there is an air of elfin magic

about the misted city; autumn in the highlands and a cold star burning over a crisp-edged hill; autumn in Norfolk, with mallard fighting to the cornfields from the sea. All these in a robin's song!

But as suddenly those memories had gone and I was living again in the present hour. A blue butterfly went past, almost as blue as a scrap of sky that showed between the leaves overhead. Across a hot clearing where the ash poles had been cut and stacked for hurdles, the willow herb thrust its pink spires; some pale in the full glare of the sun, others a deeper, cooler pink where they rose gracefully in the shade. The thought of crossing that sun-drenched clearing was unbearable and I could imagine how hot the stacked wood might be to the touch of the naked hand. Snakes no doubt basked amid the tangles of cruel stinging nettles and all manner of spiders and beetles would scurry over the dusty ground. But here, how cool it was, how restful! At such times and in such places the world is indeed as near paradise as one could wish. And as I lay there thinking and listening, I heard, beneath the singing of the birds, a low soft humming that was continuous and unceasing, as the vibrating drone of bagpipes accompanies the music of the high places.

And then I realized it was the insect hosts, busy in the sunshine and the shade, millions and millions of them, a mass of life. In this small compass of the forest, what a surge of vital life in the warmth of the sun's rays!

Then as the ruddy light on the oak tops moved upwards, and the sunlit leaves turned to cool greens, the mighty chorus softly fades; soon, soon all is shadowed coolness where the gnats rejoice to weave, and from the wood pool the cattle, cool at last also, draw sucking feet to ponderously climb the dusty hill. Then came the honeysuckle scent, stronger now, yet subtle, and the rabbits are out along the edge of the wood. It will not be long now before the hedgehogs come forth, running swiftly through the dewy grass on their naked black legs, and the owls, foxes, and nightjars will be abroad, where no man comes.

Vacant Beach and Restless Sea

At this time I am generally lucky enough to get down to Norfolk for a sniff of the sea and a look round my old haunts, and though it is only for a day, there is a great pleasure to be found in going over familiar ground. Shelduck were flying over the burnt wastes by Sandringham, odd ungainly birds seemingly so unsuited to heathery land and wood surroundings. I went to the inn where I often stayed, where you can get a meal served in true Norfolk style and of such dimensions that one has to avoid violent exercise for a considerable time afterwards. And then I went out across the marshes to the sea.

The afternoon was unkind; grey clouds drove before a westerly gale of considerable force and there were few folk about on the miles of sand. Where the sand was dry, the wind whipped up a film of stinging particles that moved like a veil over the long beach, and the spaniel could not face the wind but kept turning his back and worrying at his eyes. Not much bird life was in evidence, only a few ringed plover skimming along the shingle banks.

I took off my clothes and piled them in a heap, weighing them down with my shoes, else they would have been blown away. As it was, my collar departed from its moorings and gave me a fine chase. But I was soon in the sea, swimming out to the lifting rollers, the spaniel following with labour but obvious enjoyment. Soon, however, he tired and tried to climb on my back, and his sharp claws were decidedly painful to say the least. At last he gave it up and departed for the shore where he stood up to his neck, gazing anxiously towards me. Ever and anon he was hid by the waves and when next he came in view he still was standing there, a pathetic and pitiful figure, with his wet ears fanning to and fro. The sea was warm and I stayed in a long time but at last rejoined him on the sands, to his evident delight.

Then we walked across the marshes to the spot where I shot some curlew three summers ago, when I had a tent behind the sea wall. I can remember now how good those curlew were, roasted

over a slow fire. But the place was strangely empty now, no birds were seen, not even the old familiar redshank, and wildfowling days seemed far away. Indeed, the country seemed unrecognizable in its summer garb, and winter a mere memory. In the dykes, the reeds bent before the wind until they brushed the water, the marsh trees bent also under the gale, and there was a sense of unreality. Somehow, there was almost the quality of a dream in my surroundings; the empty marshes, the vacant beach, and behind, the grey, white-capped sea, restless and loud. I thought of the time, not so very far distant, when the grey geese will be winging their way hither, and it is over that grey horizon that they will come.

Owl Light Time

I was strolling along with the gun this evening when I saw something that, for a while, mystified me. It was a large brownish object which was bobbing up and down in some long grass by the edge of the marsh. Then I saw it was a half-grown fox scratching in the ground after field mice. It appeared to be opening up the runs and was digging vigorously. I stood quite still for some time and watched it, and then at last it raised its head and saw me standing there. The spaniel, which meanwhile had been watching with deep interest, sprang forward and gave chase, but the fox immediately took to the reeds and the spaniel lost it.

Another interesting thing I saw this week was a stoat trying to carry a half-grown rabbit across the road. The rabbit was still alive and was kicking vigorously; the stoat was having a great bother to get it over into the grass. I accelerated the car and tried to run the stoat down, but it slipped into some thick cover, leaving the rabbit lying on the grass verge in its last agony. It must be a difficult thing for a stoat to kill a full-grown rabbit and the process must take some time.

When driving a car, many points of natural history may be observed, and this last week, on my way to and from business, I have been able to see many interesting things.

I noticed a young chaffinch, not a few weeks out of the nest,

feeding by the roadside. When the parent birds take on another brood, the youngsters are left to shift for themselves, and this applies to many birds of the wild. The infant rabbits, hardly more than minute balls of grey fur, bounce into the long rank grass and are at once hidden. Twice this week I have seen a weasel cross the road with one in its mouth. Again I notice the numbers of dead bodies of both animals and birds lying on the road, killed by passing cars. I killed two birds myself this last week and I fear it is unavoidable. Chaffinches are killed in great numbers, for they love to catch the minute insects found on horse-droppings in the road and cannot rise in time.

When the day's work is over and Saturday evening comes round, the farmer's son takes his double barrel and saunters down the lane to the green meadows behind the Manor farm. Dog-roses cascade the high straggling hedges; the air is sweet with honeysuckle and alder. Over the hedge the new-mown hay smells sweet, too, in the evening air, and small sounds can be heard from a great distance; the shouts of rustics disporting themselves in the midge-haunted reaches of the river, the barking of dogs, and the far lowing of cattle. In the distance one can hear the swifts screaming over the village street and round the church tower. Quietly the gate is opened and as quietly closed, and he is standing now in the mowing grass, close to the hedge, where the wild sorrel shows almost as red as blood, when seen from the level of the eye. You may depend upon it that when he next opens that gate, on his return journey from the fields, he will be carrying several nice half-grown rabbits. It will be dusk then, the most lovely time of the day, when countless moths blunder and whirr among the mowing grass. And the swifts are quiet at last, and there is no sound but the click of night-flying insects in the tangled hedge, and of his own steps, muffled in the dust of the lane.

Purple Emperor Enthroned

There is a large forest within reach of my home, a very ancient forest, where deer may still be found. Sometimes, when I can

spare the time, and the day promises to be hot, I put some sandwiches in my pocket and go there, just for the pleasure of wandering about and watching the wild life. And on such expeditions I prefer to be alone because one sees much more. When walking in the woods I tread noiselessly, watching where I put my feet. I do this by instinct and any snapping twig or loud chatter (one's friends always will talk) is constantly jarring to me.

And so, to-day, promising to be really hot, I went to this forest, hoping to see the purple emperor butterfly that has its last stronghold there. When I reached the main ride, where I always enter the woods, it was nearly two o'clock. Outside, the road was white and glaring and the tar sticky in the hot sun. What a change once I was within the gate!

Before me stretched the wide green ride, the grass growing lush and long near the edges, but shorter in the centre. Cool green shadows banded the sward, and about one hundred yards or so ahead, the ride took a turn to the left, inviting one forward to see what was round the corner. I find, once I get in these winding rides I must always go on to see what lies ahead, and in no place can one see more than a hundred yards. There was a scent within that cool paradise that I cannot describe. The personal smell of oak woods in the hot sunlight is a wonderful scent. Very soon two silver washed fritillaries came over a wall of briar and went dancing down the ride, chasing this way and that, so quickly one could hardly follow their flight; unlike the painted lady they do not have a recognized beat! The latter butterfly will flit up and down the same pitch for hours, for as long as the sun shines, but the silver washed fritillary is a wanderer and likes to explore the woodlands. I saw several more up this ride, one with a badly torn wing, and then when I came round a corner to where some hazels hedged a little clearing, I saw the loveliest butterfly of the forest, loveliest not perhaps in colouring, for he is outvied by the purple emperor, but in beauty of movement. It was a white admiral, and it was flitting about with gliding dainty flight in the half shadow

of the nut bushes. Now it sailed over my head, then it soared up into the sunlight of the glade, then down with a graceful lifting glide to some bramble blossoms. Here, in a little patch of sunlight, partly screened by the leaves overhead, it sidled round the blossom, showing the white bands on its brownish black wings. This particular black of the white admiral's wing is of peculiar beauty as it is shot with a deep rich brown bloom that can only be seen in certain lights. Then it closed its wings and the outside seemed more beautiful still.

I watched this insect for a long time, and then went on down the ride. Soon I came to glaring sunlight which heated the air so noticeably after the cool areas of shade. And then I came to a splendid old oak tree, gnarled and twisted, and of enormous girth. Searching the grass round the foot of the tree, I found great quantities of owl castings and wings of beetles, no doubt it was the roosting tree of generations of owls.

All the afternoon I wandered alone down these rides, seeing large numbers of speckled woods and hair streaks and then, coming down a narrow ride, I saw the object of my journey flitting round the top of a high oak tree. It was without doubt a purple emperor, and for a long while I watched it flitting among the leaves, high in the hot sunlight.

Bird song was absent, for the woods are silent now, and I saw few birds. Slowly the shadows stole up the trees and at last all the rides were alleys of cool blue-green shade. Now perhaps was the loveliest time of all. The rabbits hopped out and nibbled the grass, and I came upon a hedgehog, already abroad, foraging for his supper. There was only one bird that I heard continuously, and that was the turtle dove. That indeed was the voice of the summer woods and there is no other sound so soothing. The butterflies had gone to bed; some, like the blues and the meadow browns, upside down on a grass stem, maybe the purple emperor, too, was tucked up safely under the oak leaves. It is then one can come to the heart of things and find a peace that truly passeth all understanding.

Where Badgers Roll

I went in search of bullfinches' nests in Hieaway this evening. I go every year about this time and am usually lucky in my search, for I know exactly where they build. For some reason I always take a great delight in finding the nests of these lovely birds, for they like to build in the very remote thickets, deep down in the woods. I had to bend double and thread my way, head down, sometimes on hands and knees. Where the wild privet and black-thorn form dense thickets about eight feet high, there I soon came on a nest built in the crown of a thorn, so flimsy that I could see right through the structure. The hen was sitting tight, only her little black head and Roman nose showing over the edge. I found all four eggs clear (I could tell this by holding them against the light) and it puzzled me, as a naturalist, why this should be so. A short way farther on I came upon another nest with the hen sitting, and this was built in the thickest part of a small alder, much grown round with thorn. It contained five good eggs.

This evening it was wonderfully cool and the air was sweet with masses of honeysuckle and growing things all about. Like most woods, Hieaway was very quiet, and when a whitethroat began its bubbling song away in the distance, the sound seemed to ring out in a startlingly loud manner.

A bumble bee came droning down a rabbit run, threading its way between the stems and stirring the minute fronds of green moss (the floor of a wood in such places is always mossy) and he came buzzing under my spaniel's ear. The dog shook his ears and clicked his teeth, his brows wrinkling in an apprehensive manner. And then, as I lay full length listening, I heard the clear notes of the nightingale singing quite close to me. Again I had that sense of intimacy with the wild; no skulking engineer with a microphone could ever come here, nor could the tripper despoil this remote spot. A turtle dove began to croon somewhere in the green depths, a drowsy, summer sound. This aspect of nature that only the keeper sees and hears is a rare thing. . . . 'The life the keeper sees;

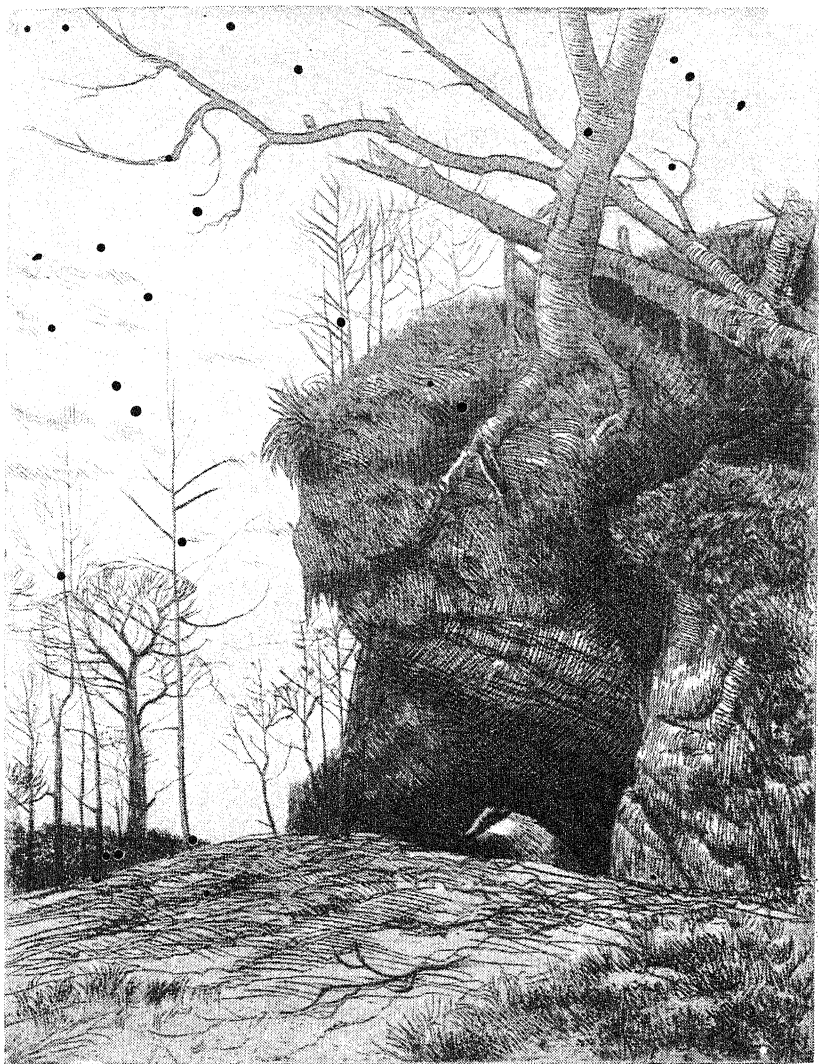
where the badgers roll at ease'. . . . Those lines have always haunted me. It is this life, the intimate wild life of the woods, that holds me in a spell. Richard Jefferies knew it; Hudson knew it, though in a lesser degree. Do you remember how Jefferies concludes one of his books? . . . 'There alone in the depths of the woods where the wild dove drinks, there alone can thought be found.' And to-night I realized the truth of those words.

The Flames of June

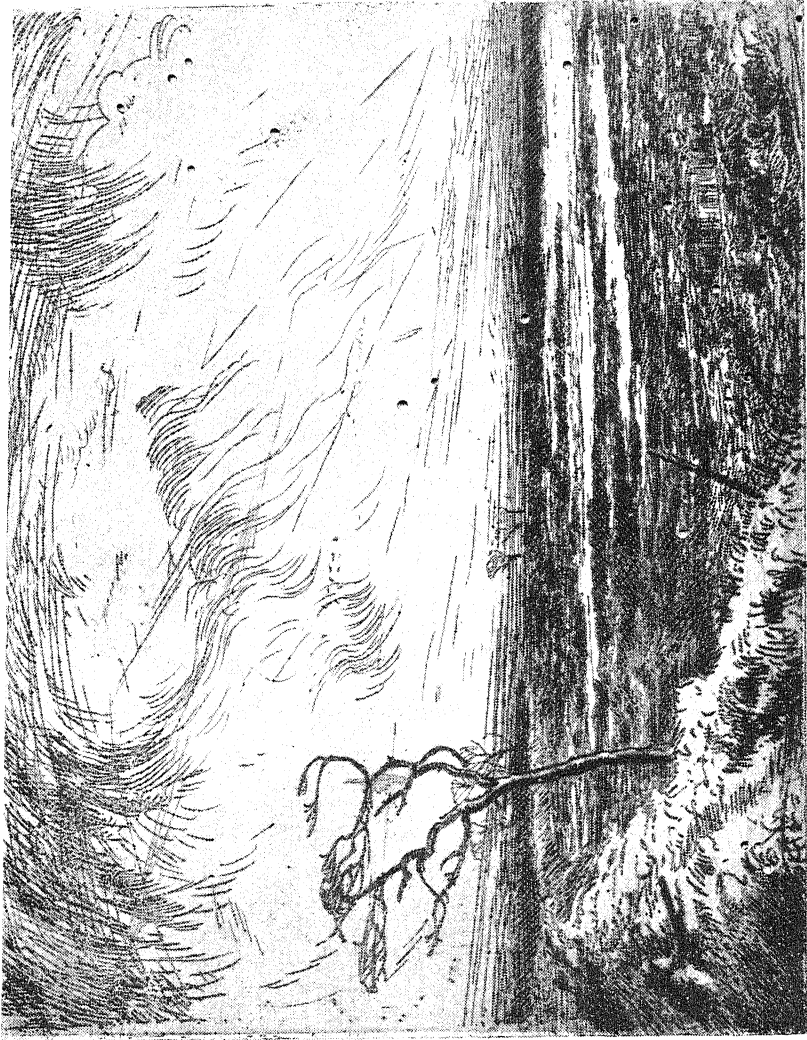
I counted sixteen goldfinches in my kitchen garden to-day, and most of them are old birds. Yet I found only one nest, built in the very tip of a pear spray in the neighbouring orchard. This nest was so cunningly hidden that it was quite invisible to the naked eye and it was only by using the telescope that I managed to spot it at all. It was nearly completed and the birds should be laying in a couple of days, if the jackdaws leave them in peace. This present year has been an exceptionally good one for 'goldies', and it would be interesting to know whether they have been plentiful elsewhere.

Yesterday afternoon I motored out to a very wild stretch of waste land that is an excellent place for uncommon birds and butterflies. It is not very far from the wolds mentioned in a previous chapter; a more desolate spot it would be hard to find. The afternoon was intensely hot and I was glad to get into the shade of the scrubby thorn trees. The wild roses were everywhere, smothering the hedges in pink cascades. The sweet, rank tang of the elder was in the air and the hot afternoon tuneful with millions of humming insects.

At almost every step bullfinches flew out of the thickets, and all kinds of warblers were singing in the thick cover. Through my glasses I clearly saw a garden warbler feeding its young and later on I came on a nest with eggs, built in a thick thorn. A family of magpies flew cackling about the scrub, and down the side of a ride I found a long-tailed tit's nest in a hawthorn. The nest-hole was decorated with a cock's feather, much as a lady's hat is orna-



Badger at Twilight



Dawn on the Wash

mented. This is the first time I have come across an instance of this, though I have many times read of the fact in books.

It was too hot to push about in the thick bushes and the heat soon made me give it up and throw myself down in the long cool grass. June was going out true to its tradition—flaming June. Another summer month passing! July well on the way—soon the golden autumn and heavy orchards, pigeon dropping down on the tawny stooks of corn, the early mists—and soon the first geese arriving, tired and weary with their long journey. These thoughts passed through my mind as I lay in the grass watching an ocean of blue sky above me, framed in a twining arch of greenery. A green caterpillar gravely revolved on the end of an invisible string attached to the shady boughs above. The warm earth, the song of the birds, the great joy of wild and living things—I felt I had a lot to be thankful for. And all the time as I lay in the shade, I saw on the other side of the ride (where the westering sun beat with a fierce heat) interminable meadow browns, bobbing over the hot dusty grass. Behind, somewhere in the impenetrable depths of the wood, a turtle dove crooned softly to itself—the very voice of an English summer.

Summer Heats and an Elfin Horn

Heat—a merciless sun burning down, day after day, the fields a raw red brown, and the stream that feeds the pools a mere succession of small muddy puddles in which trapped minnows cruise hopelessly around. But after the sun has set, a red rose globe behind the distant wooded hills, how pleasant it has been this week to wander down beside the cool water! So it was this evening after I had come home from business, to take the gun and spaniel and stroll down the cattle track that leads to the marsh and thence to the lakes.

After the torrid day the grass was sweet scented, the eye rested gratefully on the shaded masses of the great chestnuts, whose foliage is so thick that the eye cannot pierce the innermost heights and depths of bosky greenery.

A hawk came sailing over and I fired (a silver birch had served to conceal me), and it spun down raggedly into the top of an oak. A good shot forsooth, because the light was bad and the hawk high. When I left the pools and struck over the hill I happened to look back. Two mallard, disturbed by my shot in the evening quiet, had left the distant river and were circling the pools. As I watched them they wheeled and settled in the upper marsh; maybe they are nesting there again this year and will promise a shot or two in the autumn.

The spaniel ran into the reeds on the way home and put out a nice young rabbit which I shot; a pretty clean shot that rolled its head over heels so that it never so much as kicked a leg.

One evening this week I found myself on the way back from the east country, and I stopped to have a quiet pipe along a lonely road. Before me there grew in a dyke a small willow bush, thickly girt about with reeds, and in this bush a whitethroat chattered and bubbled. As I sat there watching the trim little bird slipping from twig to twig, I thought what a wonderful thing it is that it probably had come to this identical bush far away in the fens year after year. Birds usually return to the same spot, and when they pass on whither we all must go, their offspring come to take their place. Distance matters not to birds: theirs is a wonderful life, more free and splendid than we can ever know. Our movements, compared with theirs, are like those of a dusty worm, crawling over the earth's surface. Maybe this is why we envy them; they live life to the full in every meaning of the word.

As I waited there, with the long level road stretching dimly away to the horizon, the sun slipped down behind the reeds; the first stars peeped out. From some distant reed bed a sedge warbler churred and scolded and far away a cow was calling—a faint sound as of an elfin horn. The reeds stood without a tremble and the whitethroat's voice ceased within the willow thicket.

A man on a bicycle came by leading a horse, and for a long while after they had passed upon their way I could hear the horse's hoof-beats on the dusty fenland road.

A Mighty Little Hunter

The welcome rain has come too late to save some of the trees; and when I was up at Hatfield with Peter for the King's Cup Air Race, yesterday, I noticed some chestnuts already almost bare, with their golden leaves strewn across the roadway. This premature reminder of autumn seemed odd amidst all the summer greenery.

But the birds seem to welcome the rain as well as man, for my drive has been covered with finches of all kinds, feeding on aphides that have been washed off the trees.

It is with gratitude, too, that one's eyes can rest from the continual glare of the sun, and the summer fields and woods seem to lie so quietly in their soft greens under cloudy skies.

On my way home this week I saw a strange object in the middle of a little country road. I stopped the car and watched. It was some small animal or bird which was progressing with a flopping gait that was entirely new to me, and now and again the object would seem to lie flat on the roadway with great suddenness. Greatly intrigued, I got out of the car and started to walk towards it, and not until I was about ten yards distant did I realize what it was.

A very large stoat was carrying a baby rabbit in its mouth, and the weight was so great that it was forced to stop continually to rest its neck. When I came quite close, almost within striking distance, it dropped its burden and vanished into the hedge. The rabbit was quite dead, with a small puncture behind the ear. It is these 'gentry' that take toll of the young wild life, both of fledglings and furred creatures, and if only the people who spend money financing cranky 'humane' societies would spend the money in organizing systematic vermin-killing, they would be doing wild life a much greater service. If there was a price on the head of every carrion crow, jackdaw, stoat, rat and weasel, then we would have more birds in the countryside.

Mallard on Wildwood Pool

I took the gun and the spaniel down by the pools to-night, my usual walk that I take every week-end when circumstances allow. The shadows lay long up the hill and everywhere there was a sense of perfect peace. In the still air, under the rustling poplars (I shot a carrion crow out of one of these trees earlier in the year), gnats were weaving a fairy dance.

Rabbits were feeding everywhere, almost hidden in the lush grass, only the tips of their ears showing. Now and again one would rear itself up on its hind legs to nibble at a particularly succulent blade of grass. Most of them were half-grown youngsters, and I stalked one under the cover of the willows, the spaniel belly-crawling along behind. He understands stalking perfectly and will not attempt to run-in or chase until I give him the word. I could get no nearer than sixty yards, so I had to give the rabbit the long barrel. He sprang high into the air and my spaniel had him in no time.

As the echoes rolled back from the clustering chestnuts round the head of the lower pool, five wild duck took wing and circled against the soft glow of the sunset. I stepped back under the willows and they wheeled round and came dead over me. I could see their plumage clearly and hear the sibilant whistling of their pinions as they passed directly overhead. Most of them were young birds of the year and they held their way directly over my house for Wildwood pool, which lies two miles to the south. This water is off the beaten track and flanked by a large spinney. In the autumn large numbers of duck congregate on its secluded waters. Nobody disturbs them there, as the water is on the estate of a non-shooting squire, and the spinney is kept as a fox sanctuary.

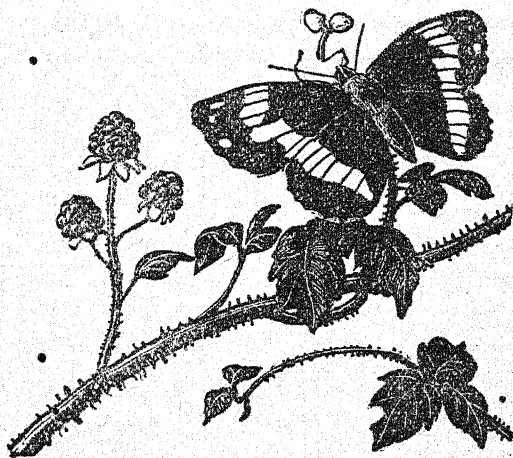
I stood for some time watching their retreating shapes vanishing into the evening mists, and in the silence I could hear the moorhens 'cruiking' among the lily pads of the last pool.

A very large bat circled about the tops of the trees, flickering and swerving as it hawked. Darker and darker grew the great

still masses of the chestnuts, turning from a deep green to sombre black. Below, a startling flash of light betrayed the water, and there seemed something almost sinister in the gathering shadows of approaching night.

The swallows had long gone to roost, the bats had taken their place; not a bird chattered from the sedges; the whole of life seemed to be sinking to sleep. Even the trees and the bushes seemed tired out with the heat of the past day, and the cattle were lying down, one by one, on the side of the burnt brown hill.

And so I had to turn away and follow the track for home, but the bats were still hawking over the reeds when I turned for a last look at the dying sky.



Chapter the Eighth

The Corn is Stooked

On looking through these pages I find that so many of the descriptions are of evening strolls. This is unavoidable, because that is the only time when I can get away for my rambles, and the regular winter afternoon shoots come later on. But these evening strolls I find are always interesting, and, after all, is it not the best time of the whole day?

All my best experiences as a rough shooter and fowler have been either in the dawn or evening, and so it is with most people who indulge in this type of shooting.

To-night, as I went up the hill overlooking the pools, I found a large field of corn cut and stooked, and a little farther on, a field cleared. From over the darkling stubbles partridges were creaking like rusty hinges, and a cold wind wandered, whispering in the alder bushes of the hedgerow. There came to me sudden realization of the passing of the year, and yet it seemed an absurd sensation, for there are yet many weeks of summer before autumn proper is here.

But it was like catching the sound of a February thrush singing in the twilight, it was a hint of what is to come, and in that little wind I could almost sense the slow steps of time brushing through the hillside stubbles. There fell upon me that vague discontent and irritating uneasiness which we all feel at such moments, a longing as it were to crystallize and hold fast an elusive beauty. Maybe it is this feeling that is responsible for great poems, great pictures, and perhaps great books. To those who love sport and nature, and are in constant communion with them, the earth and seasons are a constant joy, and the best of it is that these two things are so much

part of existence and are entirely free to all. These things I turned over in my mind as I descended the slope of the hill and came down into the valley by the river.

Over the distant woods a glorious sunset flamed and masses of grey cloud, soft as a pigeon's wing, piled up high to the west. The under edges of this lowering mountain were lit by the dying rays, and beneath, brooding in a long drawn line, dark woods stretched along. Here, in the valley, no wind was moving and the river lay a winding silver path between the water meadows. Many cattle were in the pastures, making charming splashes of soft colour against the level greens.

It was the time when the wild duck are a-wing and several circled in the distance, no doubt young birds taking trial flights. So this quiet scene, so typically English, became more dim as the sun set and the great piling clouds shut out the light. Were it not for them the evening would have been full of light, but this great pall steadily shut down as a blind is pulled over a window. I had no shot; what rabbits there were seemed extremely shy and the duck seemed to know that they could come as near as they wished.

As I came up the home meadow and climbed the fence at the foot of the tennis lawn, heavy drops of rain began to fall, pattering on the broad lily pads of the water-garden and raising little tents on the dark water.

Cornfield Ambush

This evening, when it was cool enough to move, I took the rifle and half a dozen rounds and set off for the corn lands on the old glebe. It was a hot, prickly walk over the headlands and when I reached my destination the sweat was rolling down my face. Here two crops join, wheat and barley together, and between the two walls of rod-like stalks I lay down. My view commanded a steep slope down to the brook and part of the hill on the other side. Opposite me was a field of hay, now gathered and carried, and in the cool of the day rabbits come out of the corn to feed.

There were several rabbits out when I arrived, but all too far

for safe shots, so I waited eventualities. Plover dropped in after a while; they love this particular field and roost there all the year round. A quail started to call (it was in this field that I saw a pair earlier in the year) and after a while the sound drew nearer. It has almost the ventriloquistic quality of the corn crake, but, unlike the latter call, it is musical and sounds very like 'wet my lips, wet my lips'. On either side the rods of barley rose without tremor, and here and there great scarlet poppies were interspersed, making the air fragrant with soporific scent. Moths were already abroad, the buff tip in particular, weaving its strange dance over meadow grasses and whirring between the stalks of corn above me.

Very soon a rabbit emerged from the hedge, close to the haystack, and came running along towards me over the green young grass of the aftermath. Every now and then he stopped, and when the quail called he sat up, listening intently. Slowly he drew nearer, 100 yards, now 80 and then 50.

I cuddled the stock into my shoulder and pushed the muzzle through the corn stalks. I could see my target clearly in the foresight ring. Just as I was about to pull the trigger he spread himself out to feed and I had to wait until he raised his head. This he seemed reluctant to do, and then I saw he was not really feeding but watching my corner intently. I never moved, though something was crawling across my nose. 'Wet my lips, wet my lips', called the quail from the forest of the corn, and up went the head. A thud and a short squeal followed the crack of the rifle and I saw the rabbit lie motionless out in the field. I had three more from this ambush before it became too dark to see, and every shot was a clean kill, which was satisfying. Perhaps I have got the knack of rabbit shooting now, for a few weeks ago I could do no good.

Gathering my game I returned to my hide and had a quiet pipe before the long tramp home.

Behind me, rising slowly out of the sea of corn, a large mellow moon climbed the likewise mellow sky. The poppy heads drooped downwards, almost black against the tender sky, and when I at

length made my way home over the headlands I was surprised to disturb swallows roosting in a low thorn hedge bordering the cornfield. They fled out into the dusk; elusive, scolding ghosts, soon lost to view.

The Aftermath

I went again this evening to the cornfields on the other side of the valley, with my trusty rifle slung across my shoulder and a dozen rounds of hollow-nose ammunition in my pocket. I had to wait a long time before anything appeared, but it was cool enough down amidst the corn and as the breeze was blowing into my face I was able to enjoy a pipe in safety as the rabbits could not wind me. The quail was not in evidence; indeed, the field seemed strangely silent and devoid of life of any sort.

Down by the stream, the oaks and tall ragged hedgerows were heavy with their late summer foliage; a tone of green that is almost bronze in colour. All the vivid green seemed gone from the landscape, save for the aftermath, which struck a bright note alongside the more sombre vegetation. Over on the far side of the slope, across the brook, there was a great stain of scarlet, like blood, on the already ripened corn and the edges of this stain were diluted thinner and thinner as the more scattered poppies fell out, like advance guards, into the crop. Soon a common bunting came and jingled his keys from the topmost spray of a red-tipped hawthorn bush about thirty yards away, but even he seemed depressed with the brooding evening and soon flitted away.

Thunder muttered away to the west and a haze spread over the scene. On the skyline, I could see a row of tall ashes, where four years ago I made a mighty bag of pigeon at harvest time. I rely on the kindness of friends for the major part of my rough shooting about here, and they little know what a keen pleasure it gives me and what an interest it adds to life.

About one hundred and fifty yards away, there was a roll of wire standing against the side of the corn, in readiness for use in the autumn when the field is to be divided. While idly looking at this

I was aware of a small brown object that was certainly not a clod of sunbaked earth, nor was it a stone. I was puzzled for a long while what it could be, as it never moved, and then at last, as I watched closely, it stirred. I settled down and found a comfortable place for my elbows and raised the rifle. It was a long shot and it seemed a pity to fire, because other rabbits would be coming out, but the long wait was boring and I decided to fire. Peeping down the aperture I could only just see my target, but holding my breath I squeezed the trigger.

From where I lay I saw the dust fly in an orange spurt a foot above my target and the brown object flattened into the grass so that I could only see the head and ears. Aiming low I fired again and heard the unmistakeable sound of the bullet 'tell'. The target vanished, but when I walked down, carefully pacing the range, I found a beautiful young rabbit lying with a bullet between the ear and eye.

I think if people only knew what these little rifles are capable of when properly handled, they would be in much greater demand.

A Rare Albino

I saw a fine albino yellowhammer this morning. It was a beautiful bird, rather like a snow bunting with the same tawny marks about the body, though most of it was a pale yellow-white. I remember, years ago, seeing a white swallow, but I think a white yellowhammer is a rare example of albinism. This year I have found few bullfinches' nests and I have not seen so many of these birds about; I think this finch is becoming steadily rarer every year. One of the reasons for this is that the thorn thickets bordering roads are cut down and old roads that once were so sequestered are now made possible to traffic. It is a curious thing about these birds that they seem to like an old road that is overgrown with sweet briar and blackthorn more than any other type of locality. I have mentioned this finch a great deal in my book because it is, I suppose, almost my favourite finch, and I always have some with me, birds that I have reared myself; needless to say, before the new regula-

tions came in. No bird makes such a charming and affectionate pet and where they have a large cage in which to fly about, their colours are set off, especially if the cage be green. My birds come out of their cage and fly about the room, perching on my shoulder and taking hemp from my lips. Hemp, however, is bad for bullfinches, as I had one hen that turned quite black; this was entirely due to the hemp seed.

I have had several young rabbits lately down the paddock, though unavoidably I shot three does as well. There is no telling their size in long grass.

Walking in the Woods

Walking in the woods this evening, I witnessed a curious thing which one does not often see. I was opening a gate that led out of a ride when I heard a rustle in the tall oak overhead. I turned round just in time to see a grey body falling swiftly through the air from a branch above me. There was a loud thump and a second later I saw a grey squirrel scrambling up the rough bark of an oak close by. It had evidently fallen from a high branch (probably startled by my sudden appearance) but seemed none the worse. I also saw a flock of chaffinches which kept on flying down to something on the road. When I came up to it I saw it was the remains of a dead cock chaffinch. I waited a little while and the other chaffinches came back, and they kept on taking it in turns to peck at the corpse. What was the meaning of this strange behaviour?

The garden is full of young and lusty broods these days. A goldfinch reared its family safely in the orchard and now leads it all over the grounds. No bird seems to enjoy life so much as the goldfinch: their buoyant flight seems to show their high spirits. Greenfinches, too, are very common in the garden and several broods have been reared.

There is little chance for the gun now, as long as the hay remains uncut, and with this heavy rain it looks as if it will remain so for some time yet. Rabbits are quite invisible; only a movement

in the grass betrays their passage to the hedge. I shot one on the tennis lawn two nights ago, but this is the only shot I have had.

This Quiet Hour

Late to-night, at about eleven o'clock, I was walking across the tennis lawn. The scent of the lime trees made the lovely summer night fragrant, and bats were circling round the house. Roach and minnows were catching flies between the lily pads and great humming beetles sped, 'bullet-wise', over the lawns.

I saw some dark objects near to the flagged stones that border the pool and going up quietly I found two hedgehogs. They rolled up tightly when they felt my steps approaching and I placed them close together, nearly touching each other. Then for fully a quarter of an hour I waited but they did not uncurl. At last one of them began to slowly move but as soon as his spines touched his neighbour he rolled up tightly again. This went on until I was tired of watching them; first one little beast unrolling and then the other, but each time their spines touched they closed up at once.

Not many years ago I found a nest of hedgehogs in our shrubberies and kept the babies (four of them) with their mother in the stables. For some weeks they thrived, until one morning I found the mother had eaten her children, leaving only the soft spined jackets.

I went over the lawn and climbed the fence by the sunken wall and so down to the pools. There was no breeze stirring, and the masses of sombre foliage drooped listlessly without a rustle. All about, moths were abroad, some circling the bushes or blundering in the long grass close to the hedge. Out in the sloping field the hay had been cut and lay in fragrant swathes that perfumed the night, and mingled with this scent I could also trace the breath of lime trees, though these were away on top of the hill, more than two hundred yards distant. Rabbits chased each other round the sandy warren by the big walnuts and, as the night advanced, grew bolder, playing with abandonment right out in the open, a long way from the warren.

Close to the marsh there was a forest of wild hemlock, showing very white in the semi-darkness, and soon I came to the alder bushes, likewise laden with bone-coloured plates of bloom. The scent of alder is disliked intensely by some people, but I do not mind it. Growing in the long grass close to the path a miniature wood of silver poplar shoots were springing up—offspring of the three big poplars close by—and their beautiful silvery leaves also shone out against the woolly tones of tangled grass.

How peaceful it was now, at this hour! There was an English writer that could describe this summer peace perfectly. Kipling understood the inmost secret of the English countryside, just as he understood the haunting romance of India.

Down by the last pool the huge wild rose bush, with its flowers past their glory, was full of clicking moths; some appeared to be right in the centre of the leaf tangles. Oh, but what a paradise was this, now in this quiet hour! Would we might be rid of discontent, with the everlasting quest for complete happiness! Here was I, young, and longing for all that life held, troubled with a burning disquiet, half blind to this magic night. And I knew what I lacked. Stevenson, by his lonely camp on the Lozère, was disturbed by this lack; I longed, how deeply! for that fellowship more quiet than solitude, for solitude made perfect. But, as Louis Stevenson must have found, there are few who would have satisfied that hunger, that 'strange lack' as he names it; and maybe because of this I walked alone through the night grass and felt unquiet in my soul.

And soon I saw dim shadows under the willows and heard the tearing 'scrush scrush' of grass, as the cattle fed. Then over the heavy chestnuts the moon arose, solemn as an owl, reflected in the calm water. First it showed as a halo, reddish still, and then the mellow moon itself.

Some waterfowl were fighting on the upper pool, larking about and chasing each other between the lily beds. The excited squeaks and splashes echoed between the tree masses, so that even the cattle raised their massive heads and thick pink lips ceased for a

moment to mumble and chew. Then came the hoot of a tawny owl, trembling and sonorous, and a ghost sped over the reeds and lit on a post rail, where it turned its head from side to side. Answering, came the wheezy 'Zeeeeeewit Zeeeeeewit' of its young from the hole in the splintered chestnut.

Summer lightning flickered over the horizon. At last came the deep tones of the village clock striking midnight. One by one the strokes beat out. The last beat wavered away to silence and, a second after, a very distant owl hooted, twice.

Cuckoo Mystery

At the top of my garden is a collection of pea sticks against an old wall. Every year a hedge sparrow builds its nest somewhere in the wood-pile and usually hatches off a brood.

This spring I found the nest containing three eggs and a cuckoo's egg. Curiously enough I have only twice before found a cuckoo's egg and only three times a young cuckoo, so this was quite an event. I removed the egg and on visiting the nest two days later, found another! I think in all probability it was the same cuckoo as it has been proved that the female cuckoo visits the nest where she deposited her egg, to see how things are going forward. It is curious, however, that she should lay another.

Some years we get a perfect plague of cuckoos and sometimes they are comparatively scarce. What queer twist of nature, what strange perversion, first led to the cuckoo using the nest of another bird? For how long has this been so?

In the insect world we find a cuckoo among the lepidoptera; but here an even stranger thing. The large blue, as is well known, lays its egg on the flower head of the wild thyme growing over an ant-hill. After hatching, the caterpillar feeds for some time on the food plant until the 'honey gland' forms on the dorsal surface of the tenth segment, and then the fun begins. Very soon an ant comes along and investigates the honey gland with its antennae, and finally smells and licks it. Immediately this happens, the gland swells and ejects a drop of white liquid which the ant immediately

devours. After a time the caterpillar gives the ant a signal by swelling the thoracic segments of its body and is then picked up by the ant and is carried down into the ant's nest, where it is fed by the ants for five or six weeks, when it changes into a chrysalis. After remaining in this stage for about three weeks, it emerges and finds its way to the open air. This somewhat complicated method of perpetuating the species no doubt accounts for the extreme rarity of the large blue.

I went to Barnwell Wold the other day in search of rare butterflies (this locality was once famed for large blues) and managed to secure several good specimens of high brown fritillaries and one superb specimen of a silver washed. This insect was basking in the sun on some wood shavings. Most of the large woodlands have been cut down, but it is nevertheless a splendid locality for rare butterflies, and purple emperors are still found in some of the last remaining oak woods in the district, though I have never seen them.

The sun was so hot I was soon glad to rest in the shade of some dense blackthorn bushes, and here I listened to the curious reeling of the grasshopper warblers. They abound in the thick under-wood and hedges, though I have not found a nest; one of the hardest to locate of all British birds. As I lay in the shade I heard a bullfinch piping in the blackthorn and after crawling about on the thorny moss under the thickets I soon found the nest with the hen sitting. It contained three eggs and was so frail that I could see them through the flimsy fibres. Sometimes the bullfinch will build quite a substantial nest, but they are usually as slovenly as a wood-pigeon's platform of twigs.

Under the cool shadow of the wayside trees the flies jiggled and danced, continually joining together in the air and breaking asunder.

Cameo

This evening I went up the old glebe fields and took the rifle, on the chance of a rabbit. But there is so much grass still uncut that

it was quite impossible to get a clear shot. About nine o'clock, just as the sun was going down, I saw a great company of rooks, accompanied by their buglers, the jackdaws, coming over from the wooded heights of Hazeldene. Now I know the country so well about here that I remembered there was no large wood or other roosting place for the rooks anywhere in the direction they were flying, and I wondered at the reason for this great concourse leaving their rookery at so late an hour. Then I saw them all alight in a small field that had been newly cut, and here they ranged themselves in long rows on the fallen swathes, appearing an intense black against the bright green. Nearby there were some electric cables and a great many of the rooks and daws flew up and perched on the wires, where they sat for a long time. Meanwhile the rooks on the ground were busily feeding, though one by one they flew up and joined their comrades. I did not see them go while I was there, and it must have been practically dark when they flighted back to the woods on the other side of the valley.

As I came down the lane, two large teams of mallard passed over, coming from the direction of Wildwood and heading for Nazeby reservoir. Maybe they will flight on this line every evening, in which case I must lie up with my big eight-bore and give them a salute as soon as August is in.

The Mallards Fly

These last evenings I have noticed mallard flighting out from the pools below the house to the cornlands over the valley. At almost the same time, just when the light is fading, I see them circling over the trees and then go straight as an arrow over the hill. There is some corn already cut somewhere in that direction, and the fields are large and somewhat remote from the road. Therefore, in a few days, I hope to wait for them. Once I have ambushed them they will go right away and I shall see them no more until the early winter. It is curious, this regular recurring habit of the duck. I do not know whether any nests got off safely in the marsh and I did not see any old birds about in the breeding season.

It was late to-night when I got back from business, almost too dark to see; nevertheless I took the double gun and the spaniel and strolled down the fields. Before me, as I walked, out of the mowing grass, a constant weaving of moths kept me company, glimmering white in the dusk. When I approached the warren on the hill, I moved with caution, and the spaniel belly-crawled behind.

In the bad light, I could see two half-grown rabbits about forty yards away, intent on feeding, and almost hidden by the nettle clumps. They were four or five feet apart and I fired first the right barrel and then the left, as the other ran for cover. Though the first shot was sheer murder, the second shot was a good one, considering the visibility, and I rolled him over close to the warren. As I unloaded, my ears caught a well-remembered sound that caused me instinctively to drop on one knee. It was the sibilant whistle of wings, high above, and, looking up, I saw two mallard passing over, 'wings linked, necks astrain. . . .' bound, maybe, for the 'steel-grey lagoon that no man knows'. The spaniel heard them too, for I saw him look upwards and search the sky, and he gave a low whimper.

That secret passage of winged wild things, bound for some lonely and well-loved ground, holds for some a wonderful fascination. Most wildfowlers will know what I mean when I say that at such moments one has a fleeting feeling of strange unrest, and, in the sound of passing wings, one realizes human limitations.

The freedom of birds, and especially wildfowl, seems more marked, and the mind grasps, for a second, the passage over the darkling countryside, over the ripening corn-fields and sleeping villages, where so many living things are preparing for rest. But for the wildfowl it is the awakening of a new day, and the lonely water meadows and sequestered creeks become the scene of bustle and activity. When the stars are paling in the early dawn, they will be returning, and another long, hot summer's day will see them resting and sleeping where no man may see. And when

the wings of the flappers are strong enough and autumn steals upon them with strange new urges, they will up and away on such a night as this—whither?

Perhaps to the wide marshes of the east coast, maybe to some lonely highland tarn or the moonlit ooze of Lindisfarne, . . . we cannot follow.

Gnat Time and Shadow Time

I have noticed quite a lot of duck on the wing these last few evenings, and last night the gardener told me that four passed directly over the house, obviously bound for Wildwood pool. These duck must have been hatched in the immediate neighbourhood, probably in the marsh below the house, though I saw no flappers there this summer. Mallard are very secretive in the breeding season, however, and they probably hatched without my knowing it.

I took a stroll over to Wildwood to-night, and, as I expected, when I topped the rise of burnt grass that hides the view of the wood and pool, I saw several brown shapes cruising on one end of the water, close under the wood. When I got within eighty yards three mallard took wing, and, circling wide over the tree-tops, made off for our own territory.

The dark pool looked very sinister with the sombre trees shutting out all reflected light, and as I stood quietly watching, a big pike jumped out in the middle, close to a lily bed. It made such a splash and noise that a moorhen exclaimed in alarm from the dense reed-bed under the wood, and the ever-widening circles of water broke the dark reflections into a million tiny fragments.

Pigeon wheeled over the ash poles and a jay screamed from the thicker covert. Soon a heron flapped into view and I stepped quickly back under the willows. He circled the trees and pool in ever-decreasing and lower circles, his keen eye scanning suspiciously for lurking danger, and eventually pitched not more than ten yards distant.

But his long legs had hardly lowered when he sprang again into the air, and though I am sure he had not seen me, he went purposefully away. These birds are incredibly wily and seem to sense when danger threatens. So still was it that a moorhen ventured out again at the upper end of the pool and began pecking about in the water.

Close by, a shoal of roach swam past between a gap in the lilies, and the fleeting procession seemed never-ending. Gnats danced a fairy dance as the dusk began to gather.

The Sunlit Harvest

Harvest is here! When the drowsy afternoon is filled with the murmur of the reaper and the heat makes a mirage over the distant stubbles, then I think of summer as past. And what is perhaps more to the point, I think of pigeon and how they will be dropping down on to the sheaves in their legions. Therefore, early afternoon found me taking my way over the rough hill pasture to the valley fields where the corn is stooked. The heat was terrible over those parched lands, and I was thankful when I reached the shade. Thousands of pigeon seemed to rise in a blue cloud from the sheaves and many landed in a high ash growing in the hedgerow. Within range of this I built my hide against the bushes and set out two decoys in the field. I had a bag of cartridges, some of them the new metal cases which I was anxious to try out.

Not many minutes passed before I heard a 'swoosh', and two pigeons flew over the hide, making for the 'coys. It was a shot I revel in, with the bird going away from me and flying straight. It fell in a cloud of fluff and hit the stubbles with a resounding thwack.

At the report of the gun, the air was filled with wheeling daws and rooks and countless pigeon, arrowing here and there. One came over me, high, beyond the ash, and the shot reached him, tumbling him into the hedge. Soon twelve birds were in the bag and my misses amounted to seven. Then, whether the birds had

had enough or whether the heat was too great even for them; I was left with a deserted field. Out on the stook tops I had placed my dead victims to act as decoys, a veritable flock of blue-grey bodies, which I defied any passing pigeon to resist.

But I looked out over the dancing stubbles and piled sheaves and saw only the blue-bottles busy round the dead birds. A white butterfly went past, fluttering like a scrap of paper against the blue sky, over the stooks; on, on, until I could scarcely see it. And yet, with straining eyes, I could still see now and then that flick of white, even when it reached the stumpy oak trees in the distant hedge. These trees had blossomed forth with a fresh yellow green at their branch tips, a kind of false growth that is peculiar to oaks and looks at a distance as if the leaves were already turning.

Presently a multitude of chirping sparrows came down and perched all above me (I could see glimpses of their buff breasts through the interstices of the leaves). They quarrelled and fought unceasingly, like a lot of ragamuffins, and then went down, until the sounds died away. In the distance, I heard the bugling of the jackdaws and soon beheld a roughish company wheeling so high in the sky above the cornfield that I could scarcely see them. It was time to take some liquid refreshment that I had thoughtfully brought with me, and after that a pipe. Some people would indeed wonder what pleasure is to be had in spending a hot afternoon in this fashion. And if you asked me, I doubt if I could tell you; I only know I found it good.

Flighting Time

To-night, as I was sitting on my lawn about nine-fifteen, I heard a sudden whistling overhead and, on looking up, saw four wild duck strung out above me, flying extremely low and outlined against the sky. I had laid my gun on the bank about ten yards away, so it was hopeless. Those four duck have been on the wing several evenings lately and they have always found me unprepared; either I have had no gun with me or it has been unloaded. But if

I spend a few twilights waiting for them, one evening I shall be successful.

A curious fact I have noticed these last few evenings, especially when it has been still and calm, is the sound of gunshots of the rabbit potters. Wait and listen and you will hear the reports of guns every few minutes, some very faint and far away, others quite close at hand. It is the time of day when the farmers take a well-earned stroll round their pastures, with the hope of a Sunday rabbit. The other evening I could almost imagine myself on some estuary with the sound of the fowlers' guns going off. It reminded me of evenings on the Solway. As dusk falls and there descends that witching hour when the fowl are on the wing, a roll of gun fire passes down the coast; sometimes the heavy blunt boom of a large-bore gun breaks the scattering shots of the twelves.

While out in my car this afternoon I found a goldfinches' nest. I had stopped to refuel and as I stood by the bonnet of the car, a goldfinch began to sing in an oak tree, not thirty yards distant. From its jerky song I fancied I knew it was a nesting bird, so I waited quietly, watching.

Across the road was a little elm tree that had been topped, and the crown of the stump was sprouting a thick new growth. I made up my mind that the nest would be there if anywhere, and when, a few minutes later, the goldfinch left the tree where he had been singing and flew across, my suspicions increased. Before the man had finished filling the tank, I hopped over a low wall (much to his amazement) and stood under the tree. In a few minutes I had found the nest, built right at the top of a spray and almost invisible to anyone on the ground; indeed, unless the eye had been trained to pick out a nest, it would have been quite invisible.

During the breeding season, if one hears any uncommon bird singing, and if one waits and keeps one's eyes open, its nest may soon be found. This is a simple fact that so many overlook. Nests may be found by systematic searching without watching the parent birds, but the former method is more scientific. The gold-

finch is a late breeder and sometimes young are in the nest in September.

Death of a Deer

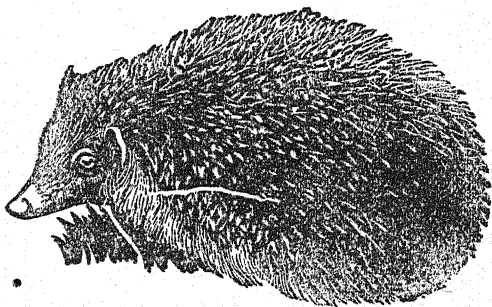
I have been down here all the week, and seem to have done a very great deal. Two evenings ago my host took me to an excellent stretch of the Taw, where I had some good sport, but no large fish. And this morning, quite early, as we were riding up to the moors, we spotted a 'rogue' deer that has been plaguing the farmer on my host's shoot for some time past. It was running with some cattle and as soon as we saw it we wheeled our horses and made for home.

It was the work of a few minutes to get the rifles and we were back on the hill within the hour. I spun a coin as to who should shoot and my friend won. By now the sun was well up in the sky and it promised to be another heavenly day. As we doubled across the field towards the low wall, the heat beat fiercely down, even though it was scarcely nine o'clock. I saw my friend peer over the wall between the tangled roots of the thorn trees and shake his head. Then he crept lower down the wall and looked again. I saw him stiffen and watch for an instant, and I knew he had seen the deer. I could hear the cattle moving in the bracken and wondered what was happening.

Slowly the rifle crept to his shoulder and then for an agonizing minute or two he wriggled and pushed to get a better and more comfortable view. A large stone dropped with a thump, and I thought all was over, but the breeze was in the right direction and the deer never heard a sound.

As I watched from my vantage point, a few yards distant, I saw the muscles of my friend's cheek bulge against the stock. There was something sinister in these stealthy preparations and it seemed as though he was about to perform a delicate and important surgical operation, as indeed he was. Then, without warning, I heard the crack of the rifle and the thump of the bullet's 'tell'. We leapt the wall and crashed through the veil of brambles on the far side.

Out in the hot bracken the cattle stood unperturbed, with swishing tails, and there, lying on its side, was the stricken deer. The bullet had entered the right side and come out through the heart. We dragged the carcass back to the farm and in a few moments were descending the narrow road to the valley below. My friend had shot his first deer.



Chapter the Ninth

Irish Interlude

I have arrived here for ten days' fishing and shooting, and this morning I went up the side of the lake for about three miles, with the gun. My first shot came soon after I had started. A bunch of curlew flew in from the lough, and seeing the setter roving the bog, they came over to investigate. One bird came well in over a stone wall and I had him with the left barrel, dropping him into the bog. Soon afterwards the setter gave a point and a snipe rose, and fell to my second shot. At the report, another snipe rose, but too far out for a shot.

Working up the lake side through very rough cover, I shot four more, missing several easy shots unaccountably. One bird sat so close that it got up under my feet. The morning was stormy, with fierce showers of rain; this no doubt made the snipe lie close.

On Monday I hope to shoot some grouse. There are a few on the mountains, but I believe they are very wild and the walking is pretty heavy. Later on, in October, there are plenty of woodcock to be shot and a few wild geese—the greylag, or 'Scotch goose', as they call it about here—but the country is so wild and extensive, I should imagine it is difficult to find their flight lines.

I have not much faith in the fishing prospects here. Despite the ideal weather, no good fish have been caught in the lake, though a visitor from the hotel has just brought in a nice peel of 6 lb. weight. I hope to get a few duck while I am here.

A Duck Hunt in Kerry

I have experienced terrible weather since I came here, gales of wind and rain that have made fishing, in great measure, impossible.

I have had a few trout of no size, and yesterday I saw a man playing a 12 lb. salmon on a trout fly. He landed it safely after 2½ hours' gruelling work. Shivering, abandoning all idea of fishing, I took my gun and got my gillie to row me up to the head of the lake. Here are several little reedy bays little visited by fishermen, and in these remote fastnesses the mallard rest during the hours of daylight.

Landing on a peaty islet, I approached a likely spot. Hardly had I taken a few steps before three mallard rose from the reeds. I do not think I have ever had a better chance of a right and left. But their sudden appearance took me unawares and my first barrel only sent a few feathers flying. Steadying up, I took a careful shot with my 'left' and had the satisfaction of seeing one fine drake turn over on his back and hit the water with a good smack. With the high wind he drifted across the bay and came to rest at the foot of a smooth dome of glistening rock. I got my man to row up and collect the bird and then foolishly began to descend the rock to enter the boat. I had thigh waders on and the rock dived down in a smooth curve into thirty feet of dark, peaty water. Before I knew where I was, I was 'glissading' down the smooth dome and in a second felt the cold water about my armpits. Luckily, my left rubber heel caught on a narrow ledge under the water and brought my graceful descent to a standstill. But I was in a perilous position. The slightest movement and I should have slid off the rock into the depths, and the strong side-wind had carried the boat below me. Telling the gillie to row farther down the bank, I edged myself round until I faced the rock, and, digging my fingernails into the rough surface, I crawled back to safety. Had I gone right down, my water boots would have filled and the gillie, a mere lad, would have been of little use.

After wringing out my wet things and re-embarking, we rowed to a little peaty promontory where we again beached the boat.

Now the day before, I had seen, from the top of a high mountain to the north, two little lonely pools, perfectly circular in shape.

set like shining basins, in some wild country to the west of the lake. These I resolved to explore, so telling my man to wait for me, I set off into the mountains. After a deal of hard walking and much clambering over rocks, I found myself in a boulder-strewn valley, at the head of which was a sheer wall of rock. I decided that the pools, or one of them, must lie beyond this barrier, so I searched about and soon found a path which took me to the crest. On looking about I suddenly saw one of the pools quite close at hand, but at a lower level, and some black birds which looked very like mallard were riding its mirror-like surface. I made a detour and, suddenly topping the rise, put up two teal. I fired and one dropped and immediately dived. After searching about for some while, unsuccessfully, I went on to seek the other pool. Dusk was now coming on and for some time I tramped a waste of bog without result. Of a sudden, I saw the other lake, devoid of any cover, within a hundred yards of me on the flat bog.

Over ground that quaked ominously I approached, and, as I did so, a teal swam out from the bank close at hand. I fired as it rose and dropped it close in. Retrieving it, I set off for the boat, calling on my way at the first pool in a vain hope of finding my first bird. Seeing nothing of it, I climbed a high rock and through the gathering dusk I saw my man coming towards me over the stones. He had been anxious at my long absence and had come to find me. He very soon found my teal, floating dead beneath an overhanging bluff, but it was in a dangerous spot and we had to bombard it with stones until the wind caught it and drifted it safely to the shore.

Fuchsia Land

Went with Teehan and the red setter up the Inny bogs after snipe. It was a windy morning, with occasional showers of rain, but despite the breeze it was uncomfortably warm tramping the bogs.

What a heartbreaking country this is to walk, no small wonder the Irish are reputed to be a lazy people! The numberless little

ishy fields are divided by low banks, some so small that one is across them in a few steps, and then the green banks usually have a deep ditch on the far side, overgrown with long grass.

We tried the mouth of the Inny first of all, where there were many likely looking reed beds that should have harboured mallard, but all the red setter could show us was a ragged moorhen which flew about ten yards and dropped again to cover. But from the way the setter quested about, I feel sure that a great number of duck come in during the night to feed.

Drawing this spot a blank, we followed up the course of the river and Shot soon gave a point at some rushes close to the river. A snipe rose and was over the water like a flash, with the wind behind him. I fired but missed.

Continuing, we tried several rather nasty bogs without result, and then Teehan decided we must strike away from the river to the higher ground. This we did and very soon put up a snipe from a comparatively dry green meadow. This bird I shot with my second barrel at long range. We worked along the side of the hills for about two miles, shooting two more snipe and missing three times that number. Large bodies of curlew were passing down towards the sea and I shot one out of a flock as they passed over a wall.

We now returned to the river and had our lunch under a bank. Like my fishing gillie, Teehan took his lunch and had it apart, sitting with the dog, behind a distant bank. But I like talking to these good fellows and I went and joined him. He told me that S. Ireland would rather be back under English rule, but as an Irishman always says what he thinks will please you, I could not quite believe him!

The sun now came out, gilding the distant green mountains, and shining on the lovely hedges of scarlet fuchsia that grow wild in this part of Ireland. The setter soon gave a point at a little bog and two snipe suddenly rose close to us. I fired at the right-hand bird at about forty paces and took its head clean off. Though we searched for a long while we could not find this 'missing link',

but it shows what an unsuitable weapon a full choked wildfowling gun is for snipe shooting.

A great thirst was upon me and Teehan guided me to a little well, close to a white-washed hovel. I had to stand almost on my head to drink, inserting the upper part of my body within the stone well-head. But it was lovely water and better than any beer or spirits.

This is a point I have not seen noted in Ireland, the quality of the water. I have drunk the mountain streams and lowland lakes and always found the water beautifully clear and sweet. We now turned in towards the river, crossing a wide and spongy bog that held no snipe, until we came close to the bank. Here Shot gave a point and a snipe rose. I fired and was horrified to see a man's head just in the line of fire. It was a fisherman on the far bank of the Inny, fishing one of the famous salmon pools. As I fired, he looked up and ducked; the shot must have passed very close to him, if not just over his head. Luckily he was some sixty yards distant and no harm was done, and I got my snipe!

We finished up at the head of the valley at about five-thirty, and the car was there to meet us. So ended a very pleasant afternoon with the snipe, with two and a half couple in the bag.

Mountain Journey

A lovely bright day, with the mountains all pearly in the morning sun. Went with Teehan to shoot grouse on Tooreens. We had to motor about ten miles along a very wild and beautiful road beside the lake. Some of the corners were so sharp that we could scarcely turn the car. We left it by the side of the road, on a little grassy flat, and struck off into the mountains. For some while we climbed very rough country. Then Teehan drew a whistle from his pocket and, standing on a high rock, sounded several long blasts. Very soon a wild head appeared over some boulders about a quarter of a mile above us, where some little mountain ash trees grew, their scarlet berries glowing like live embers against the grey lichen-covered rocks.

This man came down to us and appeared to be a friend of Teehan's. The latter suggested to me that he would show us where the grouse were on the mountain top, as he climbed the mountain every day of his life, tending his sheep. So we went along to his house, a large whitewashed dwelling set in a little coombe, with blue peat smoke curling up against the grey-green background of the shaggy mountain behind. Within, all was spotlessly clean, and a dear old lady with a vivid wrinkled face hobbled round and got us some refreshment; I had hoped to taste poteen, but though no doubt there was some hidden away close at hand, I was given milk and home-baked bread.

After the farmer had got his stout thorn-stick and pack and whistled his dog, we all set off to climb the forbidding boulder-strewn slope in front of us, that rose like a great wall to bar our way. The sheep on the upper slopes appeared the size of maggots and gave one some idea of scale.

For a long while we climbed, the country round expanding below us with every upward step. Little lakes appeared set in the mountains across the wide valley, and beyond, a jagged range of naked grey rock. We could see the Cork mountains to the east of us. And as we went, the air got purer and more keen. What air indeed! A mixture of sea, heather, peat and of Ireland itself, its own native smell that is past describing.

After what seemed ages we reached the summit and here a wonderful view was spread around us. To the east, the Cork mountains; to the west, the Atlantic; to the north, wide, smiling valleys patched with cloud shadow and set about with large shining lakes.

Directly below us were two small lakes as black as ebony, joined together by a little rivulet. Ravens flew below us round some crags, cawing hoarsely. Not far away I saw an immense crag that rose in a sheer wall from the lower slopes of the mountain. Here, so the farmer told me, eagles used to breed, and his grandfather had destroyed the last nest way back in the 'eighties. As the nest was in an inaccessible place, he had lowered a bucket of

burning embers and so destroyed the young eaglets. Here, too, the last wolf in Ireland was reputed to have been killed, but that was long ago, in the early eighteenth century.

Now, only hill foxes have their dens among the rocks and no bird bigger than a raven haunts the crags.

We now began to hunt for the grouse, quartering the ground very carefully, and working back and forth over the top of the mountain. Once or twice the setter gave a point at a clump of heather or some little 'brew' (a ledge of overhanging peat) and here we found abundant evidence that the grouse had been there recently, masses of clotted droppings and odd feathers lying here and there. But when lunch-time came, we had not found them, and I began to despair of ever seeing a bird. We lay on the sunny side of a heather-clad slope and enjoyed a much needed rest, looking out over the glittering sea and rolling folds of ling. Insects sped joyously past us and the sun shone with amazing warmth. After lunch we tried back along the lower slopes and up another peak behind us. Ever and again I stopped to drink the lovely cold water that bubbled out of the rocks. But though we found more recent traces, we found no birds, and soon the sky became overcast and thick mists came driving down. In a very short while all traces of the valley and the lakes were swallowed up in a blanket of white wool, which swirled about us and turned the summer afternoon to winter.

And with the mist everything became ghostly, the rounded brews and solitary bastions of turf became crouching monsters. We crossed a stony plateau and reached another long brew, whose overhanging brow ran for about a hundred yards along the crest of the mountain. Here I suddenly heard a shout from Teehan, who was about thirty yards to my right. I looked up just in time to see a speeding grouse vanish over a low bank, and this bird was the only grouse I was destined to see that day. We tried to follow them (Teehan had seen three) but the mist came down so thickly we could not see more than a few yards and reluctantly we had to turn for home.

Going down the mountain was harder than coming up, and it was lucky the shepherd was with us, as Teehan would have got me lost. We found our way down at last and suddenly emerged below the mist. Like a flash the whole valley floor was spread green below us, and I could see the farmer's wife in a scarlet skirt, standing on a high rock, on the look-out for us.

Tea was set in the farmhouse when we arrived, and these hospitable and kindly folk gave Teehan and myself a wonderful meal of home-baked bread, eggs, milk, and delicious beetroot, cut thick and as tender as a young carrot.

The Hermit's Cell

My fishing gillie, Donnelly, was waiting for me outside the hotel this morning with my rods and a hamper of food. He swore that there would be some good trout caught this day, for there was a nice breeze and a bright sun, which augured well for sport.

I insisted on taking my gun, however, and this was put in the boat alongside the rods. We rowed up the lake, past the little bracken islands, to a wide bay, and here fished until one o'clock. I rose and hooked one nice trout which came straight in under the boat and got off. This was the only rise I had.

We landed on a little island for lunch, where there was a ruined church, once the abode of monks. There was also a hermit's cell, covered with ivy and choked with briars. I explored the ruins after lunch, and found a hollow in the wall, full of human bones. On some ripe blackberries within the hermit's cell, a red admiral was opening and shutting its wings. A strange haunted spot this. I lay on the green grass in the sunlight, listening to the talk of the water lapping the stones, and thought of days long past.

A wheatear came and perched on a grey rock, jerking his stumpy tail and I could see his handsome round eye as full as a privet berry. Soon a grey wagtail joined him and ran about the shore. These weathered stones and bright little scraps of life seemed the only eternal things in Time; unchanging and ever

beautiful. Man and his thoughts and prayers must perish, but these birds would ever be there. I thought of winter coming to this wild island and white-capped waves washing loudly on the stones. And then spring, the first gentle days of March, and venturesome insects flying in the pale sunlight.

I went back to the boat and we pushed off once more, the water talking loudly under our keel as the breeze bustled the surface of the lake. I had one small trout on the Devon (I thought it was a salmon by the way he made the reel scream when he took it) and then, tiring of fishing, I got Donnelly to land on a peaty bog and went up the river with the gun.

I soon came to a treacherous bog which I dare not cross but which looked a good place for duck. I shouted and clapped my hands and in an instant eight mallard rose from some small willows beyond some rocks. Had I known they were there I should certainly have had a shot, but, as it was, they all got up out of range. One drake broke back, however, and I had a long shot at him but did no damage. The sound of the report was terrific, as it was echoed all around by the mountains and sounded like an eighteen-pounder going off. We watched them round the side of the mountain and make towards the head of the lake.

I knew that there were some secluded pools at the upper end and it was just possible some of the mallard would drop down into these retreats, where they are undisturbed by the fishermen. So we made all haste to row up and find them. The wind had increased to half gale force and the waves were soon tossing our little craft all ways and Donnelly had some difficulty in keeping her head into the wind. The water began to break inboard, but we reached the shelter of the rocks before we had to bail. Landing on the same peaty moss where I had some duck on September 8th, I cautiously walked over to the bay. There were no duck in the reeds where I put them up four days ago, but there was a little bay, behind a bastion of rock, overgrown with waterlilies and weeds. I came over the top of the rock and a mallard immediately rose out of the centre of the lilies. It was a very long shot,

but I hit him hard and the bird nearly dropped. It kept up, however, and with great labour went out over the lake.

I watched closely, and when it got half-way over, I saw it turn over and fall into the middle of the water. With all speed we rowed after it, but in the choppy water we lost sight of the floating body, and though we searched about for some while we could not find it. It was now nearly four o'clock and we headed for the upper end of the lake. Pushing the boat up the narrow river, which was brimming full, on a level with the soft green grass on either side, we at length could go no farther and continued on foot. I do not think I have ever seen so curious a river—or more properly a stream, because it was not more than fifteen feet wide—as it was so deep, full, and dark in colour. Soon we came to a green bog which we traversed safely and at length came to a stony wilderness of rock, scrub, and decaying willows. I did not think it was worth going any higher up, but Donnelly was insistent, and after climbing some rocks, I suddenly found we were overlooking a small angle of the stream full of pools and tangled willows, already showing a few yellow leaves. Almost immediately, two mallard rose out of the reeds fringing a little pond, and I fired my left barrel at the drake. The range was a good sixty yards, but the bird fell like a stone, and I shouted to Donnelly, 'Another bob for you!' because I had promised him a shilling for each duck I shot.

We ran down and found the duck floating in the middle of some dead willow branches. The water all round, close up to the bank, was ten or twelve feet deep, and for some time we bombarded the corpse with stones in a vain endeavour to free it. At length, Donnelly ran to a little sapling, growing between some rocks, and wrenched it from its hold. With this we managed to reach the bird and get it safely in. Evening was now coming on, so we made our way back to the boat and set off to row back down the lake. For me, that was a memorable voyage, because of its outstanding beauty. The sun had set, and the sky was a pale, rather sinister yellow; a few heavy lead-coloured clouds floated above the sun's last resting place.

The boatman, working at the oars, was thrown into a dark silhouette against the pale sky, and the choppy wavelets on the surface of the lake were as dark as the grey in the sky. It was dusk when we reached the landing stage and a shrill wind was piping in the telegraph wires along the coast road.

This Burn is Haunted

This afternoon I took my fly rod and followed up the course of a little burn that runs into the Esk not far from Langholm.

This burn is a very favourite one of mine, and holds some good brown trout, but just now the water was low and I did not expect to do very much. There is something about this water which always affects me very strongly every time I visit it. I cannot explain what it is, but as soon as I leave the little ivy-clad bridge and pass the rough water that gushes down between two great rocks, I feel there is something fey in my surroundings.

Little green spaces open out, studded with dwarf oaks, and the grass is long and verdant, with a rather unnatural length and brilliance. Very soon I came to a low wall of loose grey stones, tumbled down in places and serving no barrier to sheep or man. And then, on turning a corner, I see the valley close in, and the trees crowding down to the edge of the water. Here a boom of wire and wood crosses from bank to bank, ropes of flood wrack caught in its rusted strands. There is no way round the boom, nor over it, and one has to thread one's way through a gap at the side.

Once within, the sound of the burn as it rushes down the long tunnel of green overhanging trees is intensified. Every little waterfall, however minute, down the entire length, proclaims its voice, and the echo is thrown back from the surrounding trees. And how dark it is, even on the brightest summer day! Even this afternoon, when the sun was shining with considerable warmth and brilliance, there was hardly a sunlight chequer beneath the leaves.

At the far end, a bright spot is seen, where the burn runs once more into the open air and trembling light, where the grouse becks in the heather and sheep call from hill to hill.

I caught some nice brown trout out of the little waterfalls, though none were over half a pound. But they were nice fish, short and thick, and in the swift water gave some sport. The over-arching branches make it difficult to cast but add to the enjoyment of this particular stretch. But not a bird is ever seen, no warblers ripple their soft cadences from the trees, not even the dipper appears to come here. And at times I find myself straining my ears to catch some sound; I fancy I am being called by name, but I cannot disentangle the sound from the rushing of the numberless wee waterfalls. Maybe it is only the sheep, up in the wind and sunlight and the purple heather, on either side of the glen—I do not know. But I have never met a soul here, nor seen a living thing but a spotted trout; they seemed to give me confidence, to dispel this sense of eeriness.

With five fish in my creel, and seven returned, I at length came to the mouth of the green tunnel. Here was another boom, set across the flood, and beyond, a fallen pine, sprawling head first into the burn. Round it the water slid, creased and deep, and at my second cast I was into a fine sea trout. He took me up the burn some little way, but tiring, I saw his silver side gleaming and a second later, he was in the net, a nice fish of a pound.

There was a sense of relief when I came out under the boom. In a minute, the sense of unreality had vanished. Here in the clean wind and sunlight, the shadows were forgotten, and the voice of the burn died away, taking its true part in the sound of the breeze in the heather, and the becking of the grouse. About a mile higher up, I came to a fir wood, and out of a little brown pool on the edge of the wood I had three very nice brown trout, all on a black gnat.

Then the shadows lay up the hillsides, sheep, like white pebbles, were strung high along a hill crest, and from a berried bush, close to the burn, three splendid, burnished black grouse flew away. This bird is common in the Dumfriesshire lowlands, and in one field of stooked corn they were as black as crows, perching on the sheaves.

And so back along the winding road, stony and runnelled with winter rains, past the haunted glen and its talking waters, and so to the car by the little bridge.

And I could imagine, after I had departed, and the light was darkening under the tunnel of the trees, that then could the Little People come forth among the shadows, and no mortal would ever see.

Sea Trout of Silver

With gin clear water and a bright sun, I set out this afternoon for the Bowgavie burn, in most optimistic fashion, though I could not hope to catch fish.

And indeed, for some hours I laboured in vain. And then I came to a place where the burn, confined between a narrow chasm of grey rock, thunders in a white smother into the Devil's Pool. At the head of the falls, where the rocks are merged in a high green bank and where mountain ash trees lean (scarlet now with berries), I saw a smooth reach of water. It looked a poor place to find a fish, but I crept up behind the rocks, and keeping well out of sight, sent my fly across the head of the fall on to the sunlit surface of the pool.

A fish rose at my second cast and the line tightened. At once I knew I was into a heavy fish and by the feel of him, a sea trout. He turned about and took me up the burn for some little way, the reel singing, for I could not at once negotiate the slippery rocks. I got round at last, slipping in to my knee and filling my wader in the process, and then felt I was on better terms with my trout. He was fighting gamely, though deep, and for some time I could not guess as to his size. And then I saw a silver gleam, and knew I had a sea trout, and by the look of him, a fish about a pound and a half. After several rushes and one attempt to make the falls—where I should certainly have lost him—I began to reel slowly and he came in. Soon he was swimming on his side just below me, a beauty he looked, with the mouth wide open. I gently got the ring of the net into the water and guided him in

persuasive fashion over the meshes. But at the moment I lifted the net, he made another rush and I saw his tail slip over the outside edge of the ring. He darted upstream again, but mercifully was still on the line, and in my frantic efforts, my other wader went in and filled. But he was beaten now, and a second time I had the net under him and lifted him out on the bank, a lovely prize, and in the pink of condition.

Sea trout are not very common up this burn and this was the first one I had ever caught in the Bowgavie water. Elated with my success, I went on up to the fir wood, but only caught three brown trout, all too small to keep. I was amused at a dipper that was fishing the burn. He was running along at the edge of the water, in the shallows. At times his back nearly submerged, and I could see him hunting on the bottom with his head right under. I do not think that dippers will go into deep water as is supposed, and I have never seen them fishing except in shallow water and 'in their depth'.

After a while, he emerged and bobbed at me from a stone, then with a shrill whistle, darted kingfisher-like, up the course of the burn. They build every year under Bowgavie bridge, and it was from this site, I got my first dipper's egg for my collection. It is rather a puzzle why a dipper bobs up and down; a kingfisher will do the same, and, incidentally, the Lilford owl, but the latter only when it is curious or suspicious.

Evening Rise in Eskdale

Late evening on the Esk, the dark firs on the opposite bank standing very still and sinister, and rabbits cropping the fine lawn-like grass.

Leaving the loud shallows I waded up the west bank, close to the willows, fishing as I went and catching a 'smout' here and there but nothing of any size. My destination was the long still pool above where the big sea trout lie. I saw three yesterday, close to the willows, when the sun was shining. They were lying without a movement, head upstream, only now and then a fin wagged,

and they reminded me of crocodiles—they were so big and quiescent.

Small trout were rising all over the river and the gnats made life unbearable. The Scotch gnat is a particularly persistent little devil, and they are so small you can barely see them. In this smoother stretch of river, out of the chatter of the falls, it was very still, the only watery noise would be the rising of a fish or the plop of a rat under the willow bushes. Willows seemed out of place, somehow, one associates them with meres and rivers down south.

I fished my way up to the bridge and then climbed out of the river and crossed the road. I found a 'local' fishing on the far bank, but he had had no luck, and after passing the time of evening with him I went on to the Ravens pool.

I took off my Greenwell's glory and put on a big white moth, and then, wading very quietly until the water was lapping my knees, I began to fish the still peaty water under the bushes. For some time I had no rise whatever, and then I heard a heavy fish rise some way above me and gleaming rings widened outwards from the shadows. I put my fly over him and had him my first cast. But the line came slack after a second's trembling shudder, and I found my cast had parted just above the fly. And so a good sea trout was lost. I put on another cast and immediately lost that in a willow, so then I fixed my last cast.

I rose another fish a little higher up and he fought well, going out eventually into mid river by a large rock. But he tired at last and I unshipped the net. It is a most difficult thing to land a fish in the dark, if you are not used to the game, especially if single handed. But I had him in the net after one false try and carried him ashore, a sea trout of two and a half pounds. Fishing on to the head of the pool I hooked another and again the cast went. I had not soaked them long enough and I deserved what I got. So I came sadly home, hoping to beg a cast from the fellow beyond the bridge, but he had gone.

I heard an otter whistling down on the sand-bank by the Bowgavie burn and three mallard came down the river, flickering for a

moment against the stars. The sea trout were rising well, but I doubt if those monsters in the Raven pool will ever be caught by honest means. Such fish sulk all day long and all night too, as far as I can see, and can only be caught in spate, and not always then.

I like river fishing at night, and at this time of year, with low water, it is the only way of ever making a basket.

Green, Gold, and Silver

This evening, I had my last trip after the curlew, on the Solway Firth. A wonderful evening, green, gold, and silver—tide low.

There are few mallard about, for the bulk of them have not yet come down from the fells, but in the half-light, seven came over me in formation, too high, however, for a shot.

Curlew seemed scarce, but I got a shot at a difficult bird that came twisting in when it was practically dark. My spaniel, Sport, found him after some trouble and brought him in; sullied with mud, however, for he had dropped into a mud-hole.

Some of the fields near the Firth are still shocked up in harvest, I wonder the duck do not come in greater numbers.

I Travel the Hills

A late robin is singing by Cantray Bridge, as I write this diary. The camp fire is dying and a fine supper over. The firelight is flickering on the riverside trees and shinging upon the tent flap, and over the high woods a star pricks.

By all this you may guess that I am in the Highlands and living the life I love above all others. Many have been the adventures that we have met with. An encounter with wandering tinkers up a lonely glen near Braemar; the stranding of the car in a bottomless quagmire in the Mar forests; a heron, so busy fishing a burn that I actually stole up behind it and stroked its back; all these things and many more that can never be told in these fleeting pages. So now, after many weary miles of rain and sun, we rest to-night on the banks of the Nairn, by kind permission of Mr. Munroe.

The light grows more dim and the camp fire dies to a glow by which I cannot write more. Now the gnats have ceased from troubling and the weary are at rest.

In my ears is the sound of rushing waters, a sound that will be with me all the night through. To-morrow we go on—to Cape Wrath.

Midnight Adventure

We are encamped this night in Glen Fruin, near Luss, in the country of Dunbarton. It is a beautiful spot, on the banks of a fine trout stream.

Since last week we have traversed hundreds of miles over rough roads that shook us to pieces. But we have seen Scotland, and it is now, to me, a grand and noble country beyond my wildest imaginings.

One Sunday night we found ourselves in a desolate region with night coming on. All day it had been raining, a change indeed from the past few days, and we were weary with travel. Driving over the rough roads of the west coast is very tiring work and we looked hopefully for a place to pitch our tent.

We came to a little road leading off towards a glen, with bogs on either hand and bleak low hills studded with savage rocks, wet and shining with the rain. We went down this road for a mile or two and suddenly saw a grey-faced loch on our left and a rocky shore upon which the water was breaking in white wavelets. We unshipped the tent and gear and took it down to the loch side, where we found a level stretch of turf. In the high wind it was troublesome work pitching our camp, and nerves were frayed. But at last it was up and all the pegs driven home, and Jock went into the tent and started the primus roaring.

After we had had supper, the wind seemed to increase in fury, and at last one of the tent pegs pulled out of the soft ground. I went out to fix it and soon realized that we should have to shift our camp. Rain clouds were driving low over the mountains, and all about, cotton grass fluttered in the wind, like little white rags.

And the loch was roaring on the stony shore in miniature breakers. As I stood there, I heard a shot from the mountains over the water. Who could be shooting at this hour, in this wild spot? A poacher, perhaps. It was a rifle shot without a doubt.

I noticed in the peaty soil on the edge of the loch the slot of the deer, they had been all about our camp, and in places there was deer 'sign' freshly dropped.

Another peg pulled and before I could replace it, another, and the next moment, the tent collapsed and was fluttering like a table cloth, held only by one peg and the fallen pole. There was nothing for it but to move camp with all possible speed, and find another pitch in a more sheltered place. So we packed the tent up and moved all the gear back to the car, making several journeys before we got it all stowed. Then we went on down the road. After a mile or so, we came to a narrow defile between the mountains and, finding a sheltered spot on the lee side of a hill, we moved up our stuff. It was dark before the tent was again pitched and the last journey with the stores was made in darkness.

We placed our provisions in a box under the tent flap and huddled into the tent. For some hours we lay awake, listening to the wind. It was terrifying. Mighty gusts would come roaring down the glen, with the sound of an express train, but in our sheltered place only an occasional bluster would rattle the canvas. The glen might have been a giant door, left ajar.

Jock fell asleep but I still lay awake. Then I became aware that something was prowling round the tent. I could hear stealthy paddings and snufflings, as of some large animal. At last I awoke Jock and he heard it too. Then there was a crash from the store box under the tent flap and something fled down the mountain in the darkness. Flashing on a torch, I went outside.

The clouds had blown away, and cold stars shone wanly overhead. The wind was still howling down the glen and our store box lay, partly rifled, on its side. I dragged it into the tent and Jock pulled it against his feet. And then we lay listening for the return of the midnight visitor, whatever it was, and our only guttering

candle dwindled on its tent peg. With a last despairing flicker, it went out and we were again in darkness. I say darkness, but inside a tent it is really never quite dark, there is always a grey-ness.

I searched for the torch but could not find it, perhaps it had rolled under the tent flap.

Still down the glen came the booming, throaty roar, growing and dying as each gust passed.

Our nerves must have been on edge because we both lay without speaking, each imagining what manner of creature was raiding our encampment. But for a long time there was no sound but the wind and occasional sharp raps on the canvas which might have been spots of rain. This little tent, perched on the mountain side, seemed so insecure, only such a thin wall between us and the stormy night. Jock was just dropping off to sleep when I heard the steps again. I had strapped round my waist a hunting knife, known, I believe, as a 'bowie' knife, and this I drew, ready to do battle with our ghostly visitant. Suddenly there was a yell from Jock that made me sit bolt upright in my sleeping bag, teeth jammering with fright. 'Quick, there's something trying to get at the store box!'

Knife in hand, I jumped out of the tent and fell headlong over a guy, nearly bringing the tent down.

The box had been pulled half out of the tent and I caught a glimpse of a dim shadow slipping over the brae. Another kipper was gone and everything was strewn about in the heather, but what the creature was we did not know. For the rest of the night we lay awake, and whenever the wind grew louder down the glen, I think both our hearts missed a beat. Sometimes I would lift the tent flap, close to my head, and peer out, but I saw nothing but the dim shadows of the hills about us and felt the cold piercing air of night. Dawn came at last, greyly and wet, and it was with a thankful heart that we saw the shadows melt away.

We met a Scotchman on the road next day and related our eerie experience. He asked us where we had camped and I told him

Ricktonic. The only explanation he could offer was that the beast must have been a wild cat. For my part I think it was most likely a mountain fox, no other creature would be so bold.

On Monday, we did only a very short trek and camped in the early evening in a little birch grove. I took the .22 pistol and stalked a grouse that was becking on a boulder, decapitating it with a neat shot; a scandalous piece of poaching, but our stores were low. Jock, meanwhile, had caught some brown trout, and these we fried for supper. At dusk, some wandering tinkers came and pitched their camp on the other side of the burn, making an ingenious tent out of a tarpaulin, stretched over curved willow wands, stuck into the ground. For bedding, they gathered armfuls of bracken which they pulled, like badgers, into their tent. After it got dark and the leaping flames lit up the silver birches, we sat round the fire smoking our pipes. A stick cracked behind the tent and a young gipsy stepped into the circle of the firelight and without a word seated himself by the side of our fire. He was a queer looking customer, with shaggy black hair, and we could not understand what he was saying. Then I heard whisperings in the nut bushes, close at hand, and after a while, he got up and went away. As soon as he rejoined his camp, the tribe fell upon him and beat him. His cries filled the dingle and made us wish we were elsewhere. They took him at last into the tent and we could see agitated shadows and a stick rising and falling.

They wrangled like jackals far into the night and it was long before all was quiet once more. Very early next morning I heard hoof beats on the road, and peeping under the tent flap, I saw them going away up the glen; a strange procession, headed by an old patriarch on a donkey, with a beard that reached almost to his waist.

These highland glens seem full of tinkers and we passed many encampments. How they manage to live is rather a mystery. After a good breakfast of more trout, we took the road, and so we go on. Truly this is a great life indeed; to-morrow we hope to make Loch Ness.

A Quiet Pipe

We camped this night on a little peninsula out in Loch Oich. It was a wonderful spot, with the still waters of the loch lapping almost all around us. Not a breath of wind ruffled the surface, it lay as calm as an inland pond. All about, growing on the peninsula, were oak trees, and their leaves were beginning to turn yellow. A robin's sad pipe gave one the feeling that autumn had indeed arrived, and as the evening advanced, wreaths of mist straggled up the corries and glens of the far hills.

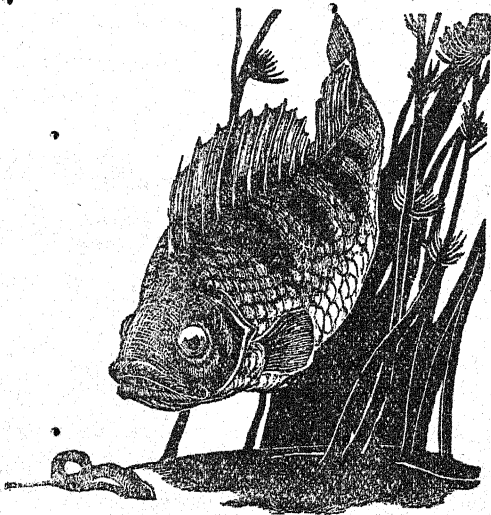
The smoke from our camp fire rose straight into the air, and there was a great sense of peace; of another year having reached full maturity.

The little car looks tired, standing close by, with the dusty tyres half-buried in the bracken. White dust lies thickly in the interstices of the hood and the radiator no longer winks and glitters with its former glory. Yet what wonders this little car has accomplished! Never for a moment has she let us down or faltered in her task, though nearly two thousand miles have been added to her twenty-three thousand. I look back on that sunny morning, a few days back, when, my eye wandering from the narrow road for an instant, we went lurching into the ditch on the near side. It was a bad moment when we found we could not help her and we realized we were miles away from the nearest garage. But we had reckoned without the brawny Scot who soon appeared on the scene, or the kind lady and gentleman, who also came to our aid. We manned the front bumpers and with a few slow heaves, she was on the road again.

And as I lie smoking my pipe, my mind roves over the events of the past few days, a jumbled memory of brilliant azure lochs, set like jewels in the tawny hills, the glimpse through my glass of the massive head of a great stag, couched in the heather, surrounded by his hinds, and the flick of his ears as they brushed away the flies. I have memories of the rain sweeping over the mountains, and the road leading on through a terrible country

where the grey stones rose from the heather in a hundred contorted shapes. I see again the mighty green seas hollowly thundering into vast chasms on the wild coast by Cape Wrath, while my companion and I sat perched high above, like Man of Aran, watching the majesty of it all. I throw a pebble lying close to my hand into a yawning void, and a long while after, hear the sullen plunge, far, far below.

And so the camp fire dies the while, and I come back to this calm place and watch the glowing embers grow more dull and the purple dusk softly close around us.



Chapter the Tenth

Midland Meadows

Though the sun shone from dawn till dusk from an almost cloudless sky, there was a sense of chill in the air and a pearly look about the distant hills that reminded one of September.

I took a stroll round the home fields this evening, on the chance of a rabbit, and as I went up the hill in the dusk, I saw a stealthy shape slipping along across the big rabbit warren. It stopped on the crest and was outlined for a moment against the soft sky. It was a fox on his evening prowl and was no doubt a cub from the earth down by the pools.

The mallard have gone, I know not where. They are not at Wildwood, nor are they down by the river, for I have taken several walks with a glass, in the hope of seeing them. Perhaps they will return when the leaves begin to turn on the big horse chestnuts at the head of the upper pool.

I know of two goldfinches' nests, one with young, ready to fly, and the other with hard set eggs. I was talking to a friend of mine, who is a great naturalist, and he tells me that he has definitely found the brambling nesting near Northampton. This is amazing news and if it came from any other source, I should doubt its authenticity, but the man in question is a great authority on British birds.

He also told me that hawfinches frequently come into the gardens of the town and breed in allotments. During hard spells, he swears he can always be sure of finding waxwings at a certain spot—this again is amazing news.

Preparation

These last few days have been rather hectic, for much has to be done. This evening I start for Austria, on a fishing expedition, and I have a long journey before me.

I have spent some time with my tackle maker, selecting flies, lines and so forth. Gmunden, my destination, is noted for its huge trout and fish up to sixteen and seventeen pounds are not uncommon. To give my readers some idea of the size the trout run, I might mention that any fish under two pounds must be returned!

The fishing is, I understand, all river fishing, which necessitates a boat and a gillie, and the water being clear and swift means that one has to fish 'fine'. So you see there is quite a little problem here, one must use fine tackle, but catch huge fish.

Austrian Interlude

To-day, the sun shone unmercifully from a cloudless sky. No fish moved, and though I flogged the weirs for three hours, I never saw a fish. So I came back to the hotel, and swam and sunbathed, alternately, a lazy good-for-nothing life.

Austria is apparently the land of the lotus eater; no one does any work and these golden summer days pass as a coloured dream. But to-night at seven, I sallied forth again, with my gillie, and in the quick dusk the trout began to rise, all together at the same time, 'plop, plop, plop,' all over the river. I had a brown gnat on my tail fly, and very soon there was a 'boil', and the line tightened. It was difficult work in the strong current, but at last I had him rolling by the boat and my gillie got the net under him. This proved to be a fish of $1\frac{1}{2}$ lb. and shortly afterwards I had another of 1 lb. After this there was a lull, and we 'upped' anchor and drifted with the current down the darkling river. The sombre firs crowded down on either bank, and the only sound was the quiet talking of the water under the boat.

I saw a good fish rise against some willows and we drifted down

to him. The line flicked out and immediately I was into a tremendous fish. It took 20 yards straight off the reel and then turned. Then began a grim battle in the dark. It was undoubtedly the best trout I have ever had on rod and line, and I prayed for the hook to hold. Slowly he came in with short rushes in between, that made the reel sing. Then he was close beside the boat. We both peered into the depths but saw nothing. Suddenly he jumped close to the stern, an enormous trout of about four to five pounds in weight, perhaps heavier. At that moment I had the rod point up and the full shock came on the cast.

A sudden easing of tension, a pang of disappointment, and he was gone. My gillie sank into a sitting position in the boat, the picture of utter despair. As for me, I felt I could weep.

Evening Rise on the Traun

I write this while I am waiting for the evening rise. Looking down the river (the Traun) I can see a vast mountain towering up, its peak and jagged teeth lit by the evening sun, so that the whole effect is surpassingly wonderful.

The Austrian Alps lack the more homely feeling one finds in the Scottish Highlands; the mountains are grim and naked, like a lunar landscape. But the soft rose light transforms the grey creased peaks, and as a contrast the pine woods, wrapt in shadow, form a dark base below. The whole river and surrounding pine woods are likewise wrapt in shadow and even the distant weir, where the thunder of the fast water should be the highest key, shows a violet-grey. As I write, the rose colour fades and the dominant mountain changes to a cold blue silhouette.

In the forepeak of the flat-bottomed boat, my gillie, Hans, sits wrapt in meditation. He wears strange clothes; leather shorts, gaudy braces and a queer porkpie hat with a plume at the back. Fishing has been very poor, but it is perhaps the country that interests me more.

On Friday, I fished a weir almost in the town, and was soon into a large fish just where the smother of white footed the falls.

I heard the sound of running feet on the bridge behind us as the populace gathered to watch the struggle. I had no net, having come without one, and it looked like being an exciting struggle.

At last, however, the fish was beaten and for the first time I saw him below the boat, a bulky shadow, broken by the bubble chains and shaking ripples. My man lunged at it with his hand, pinning it against the side of the boat, and a sigh went up from the crowd as it was hauled aboard. It proved to be not a trout, as I had hoped, but a 2 lb. grayling. He had taken a large blue and silver fly.

A few minutes later, I was into another sizeable fish, which fought like a demon to get under the piles of the bridge. But I held him off and the reel sang a merry song as he headed for the falls. He proved to be a nice trout of 1 lb. 6 oz. This is all the sport I have had.

The fish are here, but it needs great skill to get them and I am no fisherman. But I have still four more days to go, and there is a shadowy giant that lies below the piles, that my gillie swears is twenty pounds if he's an ounce. Perhaps I may decide the point before I leave.

Hunter's Path

I have just come in from a most glorious ride over the Fingle glen, up a track that is known as the Hunter's Path. The air in the early morning was scented with the bracken and the hanging oak woods, and one caught glimpses of flaming heather between gaps in the trees—beautiful bright scraps of brilliant purple on the far hill-sides. The path was so steep in places that the horses had difficulty in scrambling up and we had to bend low in the saddle to avoid the sweeping branches.

A curious thing I noticed about these thick woods was that birds seemed absent; I saw only one bird on the whole ride, a solitary buzzard, wheeling on rigid wings, high above the river. At one place along this path, we looked down into the wooded chasm and saw a ruined mill with a thatched roof, the white

smother of water showing vividly in the dark path of the river.

We walked round yesterday with the gun and shot a few rabbits, all sporting shots as they darted across the open spaces between the bracken. In the little marshy hollow, down by the stream, a snipe rose, though well out of shot.

These glens and valleys are alive with lovely tawny fritillaries, silver-washed mostly, but a few dark greens. When the sun shines, they flash between the trees and dart over the tansy forests, never seeming to pause for an instant. Indeed, these butterflies are difficult to catch, though later, when the blackberry blossom is in flower, one's chances of capturing a specimen are much better. The outer wings are even more beautiful than the inside, as they are splashed with blobs of silver that shine like metal in the sun.

Visiting

For the past few days, I have been staying in a big country house, not far from the Stour, and it is indeed one of the most beautiful places I have ever seen. Before the windows, the park falls away in gentle undulations to bracken-covered steeps, where the branching green fronds are well over six feet high. Everywhere the rabbits are in quantities, and the turf between the fern brakes is nibbled to a close fine carpet. In the winter, woodcock come in, sometimes in great numbers, and on the beautiful tree-screened lake, wild duck in abundance. The country round is too wooded to make good partridge shooting.

I could not help thinking that it is a great pity that these fine old estates, with their dignified mansions, one by one, cease to be. There is something so English about them; and as I watched from my bedroom window, the rabbits stealing out to feed under the level cedar branches, and the lovely evening light flooding across the gay flower beds and shaven lawns, I could not help feeling that to own such a place and love it for itself alone would be one of the greatest joys this life has to offer.

Harvest Shooting

During the past week I have been having some good sport with pigeon in the harvest field and I will describe an afternoon I had two days ago. I had found a field where the pigeon were coming in large numbers, to wheat. The wheat had not been cut, but had been laid by the wind and rain and, for the farmer, as bad a field as it could possibly be. But for decoy work, such a field is ideal.

It was boiling hot when I made my way to the field, and large numbers were already there and flew up in a blue cloud. In the middle of the field was a clump of thistles, and in the centre of this clump I soon made a good hide, and put out the decoys, about forty yards distant, where the wheat had been laid flat by the rain. I had not long to wait. In a very few minutes, the first pigeon appeared, flying low over the distant hedge and coming straight for me. I rose on one knee and gave him the left barrel. It crumpled in the air and fell into some thick standing crop. I marked the spot, but did not attempt to retrieve it, as other pigeon were flying round. Though I was partly screened by the thistles, it was most uncomfortable in the sun.

Soon a flock appeared, and after wheeling round me, out of shot, suddenly came right in and pitched all round the decoys. I fired as they settled, and knocked over the decoy. I saw one fall and, raising myself in the hide, gave a left-hand bird the other barrel as he went away. He, too, dropped into thick standing crop and I thought I had better retrieve them before waiting any longer. I soon found the first two I had shot, but the last bird I could not find anywhere. After searching for some time, I decided to return to the hide, for pigeon were circling round and wanted to come down. The sun was now westering and very soon the level rays were directly in my face. Against this glare a flock of some ten birds came in and, like the last lot, pitched all round the decoys. Though I raised myself to my full height, I could not see them in the thick wheat. Suddenly I saw the head of a pigeon raised suspiciously about thirty yards away. The bird rose at once

and with it the rest of the flock. The sun was in my eyes and I actually missed with both barrels! My next shot was at a high bird that passed over against the blue sky. He closed his wings and fell like a stone. It was now after six and the pigeon ceased to come. Sable rooks wheeled high above, and mist rose from the river valley. It was a perfect picture; the stooked harvest field, the heavy green oaks, and the setting sun gilding a few wispy clouds.

The Wind's Way

I have had a most interesting experience, working as one of the crew on a fishing trawler, a sailing boat with no auxiliary engine. We sailed from Lowestoft in a stiff breeze and very soon the boat was tossing up and down, and nosing her way through the waves. Luckily, I am a good sailor, but my companion soon began to feel the effects and went a shade of pale green! I slept on deck that night in the ship's boat, and a wonderful experience it was. The rain was coming down in lashing sheets, but I was snug enough in my tossing cradle. Above me towered the great brown mainsail and topsail, billowing to the storm, and all about the angry sea, ghostly with phosphorescent gleams, was breaking. From out of the windy darkness grew the tolling of a bell; this sound developed into a wild clanging, hoarse-throated and quite eerie, and then slowly died away. I peered into the darkness and the flying spray but could see nothing; only that dreadful bell kept sounding as if it was tolling the knell of all those poor souls who gave their lives on these very waters during the Great War.

A grey dawn revealed a calming sea, and thereafter the weather was boiling hot and the sea a flat calm. We had a few good hauls, and then, on the last morning, we lost our trawl on a sunken wreck—a serious loss to the owner of the boat. Porpoises played all round at night in the warm sea and masses of jellyfish floated along our side, ghostly whitish balls in the oily tepid water. We had no knives and forks, but ate with our fingers; fresh caught dabs, straight out of the net and eaten in this way are angels' food! Likewise crabs and lobsters and all manner of shell fish; how nice

they were for tea or breakfast! Every four hours the trawl was lowered, and hard work it was hauling the nets. We took it in turns to keep watch, and it will be a long while before I forget those still summer nights on the silent seas, with only the faint 'creek, creek' of the tackle as we rolled along. Then the dawn greying over the sea, the far twinkle of some other fishing craft, and the strange knowledge that only a few inches of planking was between you and the green ocean deeps. Sometimes gulls would ride like little ghosts in our wake, or fly screaming round us as we gutted the fish before stowing it in ice below. And again, the granting of the buoys that guide the fishermen, and the sound of the distant fog horns blowing. But usually we went off the high road of the ships, and sometimes we would scarce see a sail all day. Then the sun beat down with a boiling fury, and if there was no work to do, I slipped away to the bows and slept on an old brown sail, behind the jib. Here the sleepy creaks of the moving ship, and the keening of white gulls lulled me to sleep. Once I saw a butterfly flitting just over the waves. It tried to reach the ship and when within a few yards gave up and fell into the sea. I watched it float away, a grim tragedy of natural laws that seemed to be so pitiful and sad. Very often birds came, tired out, and fell on our deck exhausted. How many living creatures, both insects and animals, must die in this way at sea!

Sea-Lavender Land

It was good to get out on the marshes again, to sniff the creeks and the sea-lavender, to hear the pipes of the redshank and dunlin and the far, wild query of a wandering curlew out on the muds.

There is little sport to be had this time of year on these Norfolk marshes; the mallard have not come in yet, and the home-bred birds seem to keep to the private marshes. It is only when a gale blows that the duck seem to leave their sanctuaries. Curlew were in evidence, but extremely wary, and I longed to be up in my northern fowling grounds, where I can always be sure of having a splendid evening's sport, whatever the weather. The trouble is

that this east coast is overshot, and it is weary work going out all day long and coming home with only a 'shank' or two and an odd curlew. Nevertheless, it was pleasant to wander, as I did to-night, along the sea-bank, where the yellowing reeds stood in a dense jungle close to the path.

With spaniel close to heel, I walked quietly along, and the wood-pigeon, drinking at a freshwater spring, did not hear me coming. He got up with a great bustle and the first shot of the season (for me) went echoing over the marshes. The pigeon flew on, dwindling into the distance over the golden cornfields!

About fifty yards farther along, a redshank lifted out of the dyke with a wild yelping. Bang! He fell into the water, and Sport nipped down and emerged with a grin on his face and the bird in the middle of the grin. He came back to my feet and laid it down, licking it fondly. Then he looked up at me, with the corners of his mouth still turned up. These 'shank' are terribly difficult to hit, even more difficult than snipe.

I walked on, out to the sea, and as I neared the bank, its voice grew more insistent and loud. To my left the sun was sliding down behind the Thornham firs, a large globe of red with its lower edge a deeper tone. Three gold-flecked cloudlets hung high above and miles of sand reflected the glorious sky.

I stood behind a sand dune, my gun at the ready, and lit my pipe. Hundreds of gulls were coming in from the fields and gliding down on rigid wings to the sand flats. Mists rose and went creeping along the gullies, white as milk. Out on a sea of burnished bronze a little boat tossed—a boat of ebony. Over all was the sound of the sea, the scent of the sea, and the crying of wildfowl. Slowly the sun dipped down, until, with a final rush, it vanished behind the dark firs; the white mist thickened and the sky turned from yellow to green.

Perdix in Norfolk

It is a far cry from Austria to Norfolk, and yet I find myself here for a few days after the duck and partridge—walking up the latter.

I had my first day of the season at the 'little brown birds' last Thursday. And what a joy to be out on the root fields and tawny stubbles with a warm September sun shining on the clusters of ebony blackberries that smother the low hedges here!

My first two shots were wide, both at driven birds, but at last a covey rose out of some sugar beet on my left and I dropped my first of the season. I do not think I have ever seen such a good year for partridge in this county, and this also applies to the Midlands.

Though we started early, about 10 o'clock, it was seven in the evening before we had finished, as it is a big shoot, and we must have walked over a dozen miles. I missed a very easy snipe but excused myself by the fact I had No. 5 shot. One hare I shot was 'big as a donkey', as the Norfolk folk say.

Sea-Bent Oaks

The sun glanced on the warm stubbles this afternoon. Away in the distance dignified Norfolk churches rose above the deep green of the sea-bent oaks. In the hedge, blackberries straggled in bountiful sprays, some already ripe, others a deep plummy red. One sees this country best when the fruit is ripe in the little orchards and cottage gardens. From the roots and stubbles one hears the report of guns, sounds which fit in as perfectly with the autumn picture as does the hum of the thresher behind the neatly-stacked golden ricks.

My first shot was a long one. Four partridge rose from the roots and I hit one just as it topped a hedge. It proved to be a 'Frenchman', of which there are a lot in this district. After a deal of walking, and birds getting up very wild, we came to a little stubble field close to a farm. As we trudged along, not expecting anything, I heard a whirr behind, and, turning in a flash, I saw a fine covey going away from me. The safety catch had to be pushed forward and I had to turn about, but I got the last bird of the covey, and he dropped like a stone. I had another before we finished up, a long shot, and the bird, alas! a runner. Mists were

smoking up from the marshy meadows as we returned and gulls were gliding out to the calm sea.

Gladiators

As I was motoring along a narrow road, this morning, I was aware of a great commotion in the dust by the grass verge. I quietly brought the car to a standstill and witnessed a curious thing. A young stoat and a young rat, both apparently evenly matched as regards size, were having a terrific battle in the roadway. Both villains of the deepest dye, I decided not to interfere, and so I sat and watched the outcome of the contest. So, apparently, did a flock of some forty house sparrows, who gathered in a morbid vulgar crowd round the duellists.

From one side of the road to the other they fought, sparring on hind legs, squealing and biting. Now the rat was uppermost and the stoat writhing like a snake under his belly, now the stoat was top dog, both biting and swearing in a most terrifying manner. The interested sparrows crowded round yet closer and one or two venturesome birds had to hop out of the way as the writhing bodies rolled towards them. But at last, with a spring and a twist almost too quick to follow, the stoat was on the back of the rat and one bite finished the business. The rat rolled over and the stoat picked it up and staggered with the body down the road, stopping ever and again to rest. The sparrows scattered, and in a moment the road was empty, with nothing to tell of this grim little tragedy but a little pool of crimson blood on the white dust of the lane.

This afternoon I went after some bream near Barton Broad. Choosing a quiet reach, I moored the boat to the bank and cast forth my ground bait. For about half an hour nothing happened. Birds chattered in the willows, and the lovely warm sun shone on the quiet water and the rusting reeds. The charm of Broad-land was felt (for, indeed, on the quieter reaches there is still great glamour) and there was no sound but the splashing of a rising fish or the talk of little wild folk in the reedy wildernesses.



The Road to the Marshes



Then, very gently, the white quill trembled and slanted, diving slowly down into the depths. I struck, and a broad silver bream came in-board, dulling and dusting his bright scales on the floor of the boat. From then on, sport was constant; about every five minutes the float would slide away. Once I had to take the net to a broad-beamed fellow that gave me quite a bit of sport before I had him aboard.

But soon white mists smoked along the reedy channels, and the distant lowing of red cattle told that the day was dying. I cast off the boat and paddled back to the staithe, two miles away; past the weather-stained creaking mill, where red apples glowed in the miller's orchard, and a ragged cur shouted in the quiet evening.

The shadow of a heron passed across the water in front of me, and, very high in the sky of palest daffodil, a harrier was wheeling round and round on slender rigid wings.

Where the Tides come in

On my way home from Norfolk I paid a visit to my old fowling haunts at — on the east coast. Last year I opened the season there with a nice bag of mallard, but I hardly expected to do so well again, especially as the weather was calm.

I arrived on the sea wall at about four o'clock. The sun was hidden by grey clouds and there was a light breeze from the south-west; unluckily, the gale had dropped the day before. The tide was right out and the gullies were empty. What good times I have had at this spot! I got my first goose there, some years ago now, but I hope to have many more. There was the true spirit of wildfowling abroad that evening. Mists gathered about the creeks and a small chill wind whispered over the marshes, bringing with it the tang of sea-lavender. Out on the tide line parties of golden plover flew hither and thither, their thin pipings reaching me as I sat in my hide on the edge of a gully. A redshank came past, saw the dog and swerved, shrieking, towards us. I swung round and dropped it and Sport brought it in. Then a large flock of golden came by and I missed with both barrels! Another party came in

from the sea and pitched on the mud far out. I walked towards them and saw eight or ten, bunched on the edge of a creek. They were watching the spaniel and allowed me to get in range. Suddenly they rose, and I fired. One bird fell; I then returned to my gully and waited. A curlew headed for me, but saw the spaniel and turned.

Minutes passed. Gulls drifted in from the land, hundreds of them; some twisted and turned in the air like terns, hovering and swerving as though they were catching flies. And all about the evening deepened into dusk. Over the sea an amazing sunset flamed, green, azure and soft rose-pink, a fitting end to a long and happy summer. Behind stretched the misty mysterious flats, arena of the restless tides. It is over these flats the geese go, their voices faint and haunting. And it is thence the ducks come in at twilight. I often wonder what sort of world it is out there—a desert of mud, all pearl and grey in the sunset.

Pheasant called from the distant stubbles landwards and the first star peeped out. Suddenly eight mallard, with four teal as outriders, appeared dead ahead and low. They saw me, and turned! Then three high up, dead over. I had not my 8-bore, and my shot took little effect. Darker and darker it grew, the sunset colours faded from the sky and I was alone with the ghostly conversations of the marsh. Suddenly they all started in chorus. Curlew called curlew, golden whistled to golden, and the 'yelpers' joined in. Then the gulls far out on the sand-banks took up the sound. Then silence—only the restless wind moving the stems of the sea-lavender and one lone peewit calling; and I thought to myself, can you wonder this sport 'gets' you?—the finest sport in the world!

Daddy Long Legs

I have again been after the mallard this last week, but with little result. I waited up in a stubble field overlooking the lake at twilight on Friday evening, but they came in too much to my left.

I put up eight together from this same pool on Wednesday

evening, but I had no gun. They are all youngsters, hatched on the lake, but they fly as strongly as adult birds.

As I waited quietly in the shadow of a bush, two foxes stole, catlike, past within a few feet of me.

While walking round for a rabbit the other evening, I was struck with the number of 'daddy-long-legs' there are about this year; it is quite unpleasant to walk through the fields, as they rise in clouds into one's face.

The ground is, of course, horribly parched, and here in the Midlands the water shortage is becoming a serious menace. The partridges do not seem to be affected in any way, however; I think the dry year has suited them.

This week I have had several successful strolls round the stubbles. On Wednesday afternoon I walked up the two big stubble fields and shot three brace. Saturday I was out again and shot only one—a Frenchman. But for my little shoot, I consider that good sport. After all, it is not the amount of birds one gets but the fact one is out on the land, breathing good fresh air; and at this time of year I love to see the hedges rusting and smell the approach of winter. I must confess to a bad miss at a snipe near the tail of one of the pools. He took me by surprise and the shot went wide, cutting a willow wand clean in two!

A Great Trout

I was to attend a shooting party on Tuesday afternoon, and, knowing the ground, I was looking forward to a really enjoyable time, especially as it is a record year for partridge in that locality. But the weather was hopeless; torrential rain lasted all day, and though the guns assembled, we decided to postpone the shoot until next Thursday.

On Wednesday I took out my fly rod for a last 'fling' before the season closes. There was a heavy breeze blowing down the reservoir and a bright sun shining. A friend rowed for me, and we drifted down the water several times, then tried the edges. Nothing moved until after lunch. We were just turning the boat

about, and I flicked the Silver Doctor out over a likely-looking bit of water near the lee shore. Instantly, the line tightened and I was into a big trout. He took about thirty yards off the reel and then began to come in. But it was pure 'eye wash' on his part, for, when close to the boat, he took me away again and for the next ten minutes the fun was fast and furious. Slowly he tired, and at last I saw him out in mid-water, rolling badly, and evidently beat. I edged him in, keeping a tight line all the time, and the net was under him before he realized the fact. Next moment he was kicking on the bottom boards—a trout of two and a half pounds, and as pretty a fish as I have ever caught. He was so well built that he was almost worth setting up, but for this particular water not a specimen fish. Certainly I never remember seeing a trout so handsomely marked, and in places he was clouded like a leopard.

I never had another touch, but the warden, fishing from the dam close by, got into a large fish that broke him, and as I had fished the same spot a minute or two before I was not too pleased. In conversation he told me two curious facts. One, that he saw a hare swim across the reservoir from one side to the other, not very long ago; and, that in the second week in June, wild geese always pass over, flying west. He is a man who knows what he is talking about, but both these facts appear strange to me. What are wild geese doing in Britain, in the Midlands, in the height of summer?

The First Walk Round

I had my first walk round of the season this afternoon. And where should I go but to the old familiar meadows, the pools and the river? As I have been absent from home for long, I expected to find some mallard on the pools. So I stole along without sound; past the willow thickets, now turning yellow; past the long jungle of giant docks that no longer form an impenetrable green barrier; past the first island where moorhens scutter for sanctuary.

There I sent the spaniel into the reeds and he was soon on the

trail of a rabbit. Though the ground is so wet and boggy, they do not seem to mind, and in the autumn I always get a great many hiding up in these reeds. Very soon one darted out and I rolled him over. Then two came out in quick succession and I had them both as well. A little farther down Sport put out two more, but I was caught unawares and missed with four barrels.

As I came back in the dusk, mushrooms gleamed in the wet grass, and I gathered all I could carry.

The Leaves are Flying

It must be nearly a year ago, since I shot over the Wolds, and now the season has come round again. When I arrived at the head of the green lane, a fine drizzle made the long vista between the trees look dreary and uninviting. Leaves, sodden and withered, lay in the grass and scarlet hips flamed in the ragged hedge.

Half-way up the ride I walked over to the bounding hedge and peeped over into the adjoining stubble field. Almost at once I saw a large covey of partridge feeding at about thirty yards distance, and as I showed myself they rose, after squatting for a second. Up they went into the wind, and as they topped the hedge, I fired. The leader shot downwards and hit the tawny stubble in a cloud of brown feathers. Good beginning to the season! At the shot my spaniel gave a yelp behind me, and I swung round to see the rear of a bunny vanish into the far edge of the ride. I crossed over and sent the spaniel in and then stood back and waited with the gun at the ready. There was a scuffle and a short bark and out darted the rabbit. My first shot missed, the second struck the rabbit just as it reached the ditch. When I walked over I found it lying dead.

On I went, over the crown of the hill, by the little horse pond, now dry after the long hot summer, then over the rising Wolds. Some more partridge were on the high ground, but, as usual, I could not get anywhere near them, so I went on down to the brook. How dreary the scene appeared! The hedgerow trees stood like dripping tired ghosts in the mist. In the brook, dead

willow herb choked its course; rusty masses of decaying herbage which harbour snipe later on when the first frosts come.

But there were no snipe here this afternoon, and I went on up the stream to the spinney of ash poles at the top. A great number of wood-pigeon were resting there, but I could not get near them so struck back up the hill.

Grey sheets of cold rain met me on the higher ground; nevertheless there was a certain satisfaction in being out facing the wind and rain.

Partridge were calling from the root field near the green lane, calling perhaps for the missing bird who would never come back. Only a few brown feathers fluttering in the stubble gave a hint as to the reason.



Chapter the Eleventh

Cub-Hunting Cameo

It is a lovely world this October world of mist, cobwebs and yellowing leaves! And how good indeed to hear, after so long, the music of the hounds. Outside Coldhangar spinney, I could see the whipper-in sitting his horse, and behind, the valley smoking with vapour. From every twig a drop of moisture trembled, and the hammocks of the spiders were like fairy lacework with the dew.

In the silence, the clink of a bit, the shuffling of a restless horse. About twenty yards away, a girl, astride and with pink cheeks, was watching the scene. Behind her, a youngster of twelve or so, on a remarkably neat pony, was trying to shorten his stirrup leather. . . From the spinney came sounds of pushings and crackings, a startled blackbird came swerving out from the red-berried thorns and lit on the dewy grass not fifteen feet from me. His round eye was urgent and he was not so much studying the waiting horsemen as listening to the commotion in his spinney. Then he flew swiftly down the ditch, proclaiming loudly.

My horses' ears were pricked forward, and I could just see the bulge of his intelligent eye. Now and again came the sudden clash of hound music, some speaking all together, others whimpering singly.

And then there is a stir among the horsemen at the far end of the copse. They begin to trot forward towards the little gate in the corner, and from the far side of the spinney, hounds begin to speak to the scent. A sporting cub has made a break for it, his cowardly brothers and sisters have paid the penalty. Now comes the rhythm of the moving muscles, the 'turump turump' of

hooves. Clods fly upwards, and the wind begins to whistle in my ears. Along the far hedge several people are running, and out of the far side of the spinney come two young hounds crying 'lost'. It is always amusing to see young hounds learning their business; like a lot of schoolboys, some will learn quickly and others need considerable patience.

From this particular covert the Master likes to kill all the cubs he can, for it is swarming with foxes. But this little rascal got away after a hunt of twenty minutes, and we shall find him again; let us hope, later in the year.

The pleasure I find in these pearly mornings is not in the chopping of cubs, which after all is a dreadfully tame sport, but in the glorious freshness of the day, the sense of the turn of the year and the pleasure that is in store. And what colour in the hedges and the woods! I heard the first fieldfares 'chucking' over, and as I crossed the stubbles to the lane, a covey of partridge got up almost under the horses' feet and whirled away.

And soon, down the winding, narrow road, rang out the volleying hooves. The mists lifted and the sun swam clear, shining on the cleared stubbles as if they were metal rods.

The Yellowing Thorns

I went this afternoon to shoot over the spinneys and meadows around Hieaway, a shoot that I like better than all others. There is such variety; the meadows are hilly and surrounded by thick hedges, the small ash spinneys scattered and remote. One never knows what will be found in those little secret angles of yellowing thorn hedge; maybe a 'cock will rise from the double mound, close to the wood. My feet brushed through rusty oak leaves as I entered the first meadow; anticipation made me feel very much alive to the gentle scents of field and wood.

There, away to the left, I could see Hieaway on its hill, beckoning me with memories of winter ambushes and forsaken badger-spoored rides, but it was not to be this afternoon. The leaves must drop from the yellowing oaks before I lift the hand-gate.

latch to enter the wood. This afternoon I must hunt the hedge-rows for more lowly game. There were some pigeons feasting on the acorns in this first field and two left a tree over my head, with a great clatter. I missed—two barrels. Then Sport pushed out a rabbit, a fat bunny in the pink of condition, and I rolled him over. As I bent to pick it up, I caught the faint reek of powder—a most wonderful scent.

Then another rabbit broke cover a little lower down (Sport was working well), and I missed with both barrels an easy shot. Then another scuttled from some dead reeds. I missed with the first barrel, but the wonderful choke that has killed me many a distant flagging goose caught him, and the spaniel had him in a trice.

There followed a succession of misses, terrible misses, at absurd ranges. Bang! bang! bang! bang! The double shots rolled and echoed about the little meadows, making the cattle run and bunch, and the rooks toss uneasily above the dark crest of Hieaway.

Six double shots, all misses! Then at last I rolled a rabbit over that Sport put out of a deep ditch. I harled the three rabbits and hung them up on a crab apple bough and sat down for a pipe. Sport came out of the ditch, grinned through a mask of dirt and came and sat beside me, looking important and pleased. A rabbit, once dead, ceases to interest him, though he always mounts guard with this satisfied expression on his freckled face.

On we went, wheeling left-handed back towards Hieaway, hunting the double mounds and thick sets without result. Then, where two hedges meet in a rush-grown horse pond, things began to happen again. What I took to be a hare slipped out of the dead reeds and a second later I saw it was a cock pheasant. As soon as finger pressed trigger I knew I had missed, though the shot was an easy one.

The pheasant lifted higher and made away for Hieaway, flying strongly. Sport, after watching the bird for a second and then giving me a glance that made me feel extremely uncomfortable, dived again into the herbage. Out shot a rabbit under my feet,

saw me, doubled back into cover. Sport had him out again my side, and I missed again with both barrels at thirty yards' range. Almost at once another broke cover and I fumbled for some more cartridges. My pocket was empty!

Straight Powder by the Pools

A splendid time. I felt somehow that I was going to shoot well and this is generally a good sign. Fieldfares 'chucked' overhead as I set out, and a thin rain was falling. My spaniel was wild, having had no work all the week, and as we approached the first pool, he ran on ahead despite my frantic whisperings. I had my double twelve with me and two cases of No. 6 in the breech. A sudden quacking brought the gun to the ready, and four mallard rose from behind the reed bar, two passing to the right of the island and the others to the left. I picked the right-hand bird going away from me and saw him drop at the shot; then I swung left and caught sight of the second bird passing over a thorn tree by the middle pond. I fired the other barrel, a long shot, and he dropped like a stone into the reeds! I have never made such a right and left at duck before and it seemed too good to be true. I got the second bird straight away, but could find no trace of the first when I went round the bank. Nearby was a thick clump of sedge and I sent my spaniel in. Out came the duck and the dog had him at his second dive. The latter was so weary that he had to rest repeatedly as he brought it in, supporting himself on sunken logs en route.

Two rabbits completed the bag; they were lying up in the reeds on the side of the pool, and I killed them both with difficult snap shots. And so home after a most enjoyable afternoon.

Fox Cubs' Waterloo

What a happy life fox cubs must lead until the fatal day when hounds first come, one pearly autumn morning! What an awakening that must be, the end of all good times and the beginning of a haunting fear! But perhaps we are wrong here, when we think

that wild animals take thought for the morrow. I believe that all wild animals live entirely in the passing moment, and once trouble and fear has passed, when the cause has been removed, then they forget. But up to cubbing time what wonderful days those early days of cubhood; happy huntings in the gloaming, at first with Mother, and then alone! What joy to catch the first mouse! What excitement when teeth first sink into a warm-scented rabbit!

Born at the time when the world is chill and the leaves are yet budding, they see the slow pageant of summer's glory unfold, day by day. They hear for the first time the cuckoo's call floating through the greening spinneys and the chiffchaff singing in the leafy bowers of woodland glades. Food, becoming more and more plentiful as the summer advances, builds strong bone and wiry sinew, and they little know what awaits them.

Many young and helpless things fall to their share; baby rabbits, wild pigeon squabs, nests of mice and bush building birds; all juicy, warm blooded creatures that put such trifles as frogs and worms to shame.

And then the autumn, with the golden harvest stacked and orchards glowing with fruit. Blackberries ripen in the hedges (these, strange as it may seem, are eaten by foxes), and swallows gather in their uneasy parliaments to discuss the journey that lies before. Perhaps foxes too feel the urge to wander, though they seem to stay in the covert where they were born and treat it as their headquarters, to which they return from their nightly huntings of the now dewy fields.

The big walnut trees drop their fragrant leaves, and firm full-fleshed nuts thump down into the grass. All the horse chestnuts are afire and they too strew the ground with treasure trove. Who can resist the appeal of those polished mahogany stones, set closely in their pithy settings! The green spines defy you, appearing like sea urchins, then, once the casing is split open, there is the polished gem within. Mushrooms gleam, wet with dew and of virgin whiteness; and birds and men are restless, they know not why.

Then, in these days, one bediamonded morning, the fox cubs are tried in the fire; many perish, but a few escape. And every time a fox escapes from hounds he has added something to his store of knowledge; it is not forgotten, but docketted for future use.

After the first affair with hounds, the cubs do not necessarily forsake their birthplace, sometimes indeed they will return as soon as hounds have left. The family does not keep together, however; each goes his own way and hunts on his wild lone.

A short while ago I was waiting for some pigeon that used to come in the early morning to an ash tree (pigeon haunt ash trees), that was overgrown with ivy. This tree stands in a little marsh at the end of the lower pool and there is good cover in the reeds. I saw a fox returning from hunting, and he passed close to my hide without scenting or seeing me. He was loping along with graceful, easy gait, leaving dark pad marks in the dewy grass.

I had an argument the other day about the manner in which foxes bark. Most people imagine that they lift their masks skywards, dog fashion, but this man, a well-known huntsman, assured me that the nose is always held downwards when barking. It is hard to understand how the sound carries if this is the case, for in the clicketting season the bark of a fox carries a long way on a still night. Foxes bark just after dark; as the night advances, they fall silent as a rule. It is interesting to speculate how far a fox can see, both in the daytime and in the dark. Dogs appear to see quite well in the dark and I have noticed that my springer spaniel can thread his way through thick thorny cover with ease, no matter how black the night.

He likes to carry my stick in his mouth when we go for rambles, and many times I have felt him take hold of the stick gently between his teeth, even though it was so dark I could not see him.

I should say that the range of vision of a dog is not more than one hundred yards at the most.

The other afternoon I was out in the fields with my gun and my spaniel was trotting behind. Below us, in the valley, about a

hundred yards away, some hay had blown from a stack into the meadow, and a puff of breeze caught it and rolled it along. From where I stood, it looked not unlike some brown rabbit-like creature running along the slope. I missed my spaniel, and turning round saw him chasing in pursuit. He caught up with the rolling ball of hay and then came slinking back with the most laughable expression on his face, as though he felt a most frightful fool.

Neither a fox nor a dog will notice a man if he stands perfectly still, provided of course that he is not to windward of him. I have many times stalked foxes in the late summer, when they are catching mice in the gloaming. When seen at night, in the light of a lamp, a fox's eyes shine a vivid red and can be seen at some distance.

The Dew on the Thorn

It was a perfect autumn afternoon. There was a nip in the air and the distances were pearly. The sunlight, too, had a peculiar misty pale quality that is associated with the fall. I took the spaniel and the car and motored to the Wolds. Once again I walked up the ride, familiar now and dear to me. The hedges were showing pinkish gold at the tips of the hawthorn leaves, and a tractor was spluttering on the cobwebby plough. I had three long snaps at a rabbit on my way to the high rolling fields, but all were misses. Then I put up some partridge close to a hedge, on top of the Wolds. They flew straight for the sun, but I dropped one bird cleanly. Continuing I came to the hedge that leads up the hill to where it joins the ride. I had missed a rabbit on the way down this hedge, as I started out. The spaniel put the same rabbit out again, and it gave me a nice sporting shot as it ran up the side of the hedge. And so, perfectly content with a partridge and a rabbit in the bag, I made my way back down the ride towards the road. Pigeon flew noisily out of the yellowing oaks, but I got no chance of a shot at them until I neared the end of the ride. Here a wood-pigeon clattered out of an oak on my right, and gave me a 'going away' shot. I dropped him, and he fell in the ditch, to be pounced on by the spaniel.

And so life goes on, the seasons pass before us; ever beautiful, ever fresh, ever full of wonder and interest. We can pity the man who loves not the woods and fields, the wild life and its fascination. The man who truly loves his gun, loves this golden England too, and, if he is fortunate, can find great wealth stored in the everyday world of nature. But let us not forget the man who cannot taste of these autumn joys. Beyond the pall of the cities' smoke that world is still there, and may that knowledge bring some measure of consolation.

Death Bed of the Year

I shot the fields of Hieaway this afternoon—a windy afternoon with gleams of sun. I was trying out a 20-bore for a friend, a lovely little weapon by Pape, though very old. It was the hammer pattern and weighed no more than a walking stick. However, I wished I had not taken it, because I chanced on two coveys of partridge that had not been shot at this season, and I could do nothing with the gun. It seemed to lack the carrying power of a twelve, and a lightweight of a small bore always fails to give me confidence. This is a fatal thing in shooting; one must have confidence in one's weapon, for that is half the battle.

I did not, of course, go up to Hieaway, because it is far too early yet for the pigeon, but before very long they will be coming in, as soon as the first frosts arrive.

I am very much afraid I shall be forced to have my spaniel put away, because a growth has developed in his ear which makes it impossible to treat his canker. I have had this removed several times, but it comes again.

The other day I went riding on my trusty mare, Jill, an old hunter that affords me much pleasure and exercise. There is a great charm at this time of year in hacking over the autumn fields and the colours in the trees and hedges were indeed beautiful. The thorns a tender burning pink, the oaks a lovely tawny gold—or more properly, ochre hue—the red-brown of the great beech trees (there are few in this part of the world) and the very pale yellow

of the ash trees. Most beautiful, perhaps, are the tangled festoons of deadly nightshade, with their polished berries. And I took my way to the woods, for they are at their best just now, and walked slowly along through the scented rides, the horse's hooves brushing through the drifts of red leaves. Woods are always mysterious, and perhaps in the autumn this sense of mystery is greater. A mistiness hangs at the ends of the long rides and even on the stillest days there is a slight rustling as the leaves tick down.

Then I left the woods and cantered over the rolling valley fields, sending the partridges whirring before me and the rabbits, lying out in the tufts of grass, scurrying for the hedge. I saw the starling flocks wheeling and the pigeon flying high for the shelter of the woodlands. And as the sun sank lower a bleakness fell upon the land; a hint of the grey winter that will so soon be here. The distant woods became indistinct and lights began to appear in cottage windows. So 'shog along home' through the gathering shadows and the fragrant autumn lanes.

The Happy Man

If I were to be asked to define the truly happy man, I should say he was the man who, through his own individual efforts and sheer genius and hard work, had made enough money to purchase a country estate, within easy reach of a good hunting country, with an old house where he could entertain his many friends, and a first-class shoot where he could enjoy himself and give pleasure to his friends. This always seems to me to be the ideal life, and I am inclined to think that this would be the choice of many of the readers of this book.

For a man who takes a keen joy in nature and sport, who can appreciate the points of a good horse and a good hound, who loves the flick of the fly-rod as much as the bark of the gun, who likes (sometimes) the companionship of good friends and the joys of dispensing hospitality, English country life is the finest of all.

The country is now at its loveliest, in the glorious hours of sunshine amid the mellowing trees there are few sportsmen who do not feel autumn's glamour in their bones. Some may be think-

ing of the hunting field and the weep of the horn by the covert-side, the gush of the wind in one's ears as the horse is allowed his head; some may be thinking of the rusting woods, and the high pheasants coming over, or maybe the crunching stubbles and the whirr of the little brown bird; others, more humble in their tastes, may be thinking of the Saturday walk round, with the chance of a rabbit or an early woodcock in the bracken. Others will be thinking of the vacant tide-line and the 'rush, rush' of the sea, wind-blown thorns and the fleeting mallard against the early stars.

And some there will be who can bring these dreams to happy realization, and to these I say; 'Remember how lucky you are!' There are others who can never, at the moment, at least, taste of their heart's desire, and for them I say have compassion. And to the latter class (to which I myself, in a sense, belong) I counsel patience and courage. We have been told that there is nothing, absolutely nothing, that cannot be won by sheer determination and singleness of mind, and this I firmly and honestly believe to be true.

Winds Awake

A high wind was blowing this afternoon when I set out for the Hieaway shoot—a wind that was doing its best to scatter the last remaining leaves from the lime trees down my drive.

I live on a high hill and so get the 'benefit' of any wind that blows, but I found comparative peace in the little sheltered meadows down in the valley. Sport was in great form and I never remember him working so well. A dog that will search a hedge-row and yet not range too far ahead is worth his weight in gold, and my dog will keep the far side of a thick hedge and turn the rabbits out my side with unfailing regularity. I remembered the last time I shot these fields and the shocking performance I put up, and was determined to shoot better. Whatever the reason, I shot much better than I have done for some time. In a very short while I had killed all the rabbits I could carry, six in all, and had only a few misses.

The pheasant was not at home in the rushy pond, but it was

lucky I was prepared. Sport rustled about in the dead reeds, and then went slopping about in the boggy margin. There was a short bark and a sudden quick tearing sound as a snipe rose.

It was a most difficult shot, as there was a high thorn hedge as a background, and its autumn leaves helped to mask the fleeting shape. But the gun went off instinctively and the bird fell with that complete and utter suddenness that is so characteristic of a stricken snipe.

Overcoming a strong temptation to climb the hill and try my luck in Hieaway wood, I worked the hedgerows back to the road, and was indeed thankful when I reached the car, for six rabbits and a heavy gun are no light weight to carry far.

A fine cock bullfinch and his grey spouse were feasting on the late blackberries in the straggling thorn hedge, and a pretty picture they made, amid the autumn foliage, the reds of the hips and haws echoing the soft pink of the cock bird's breast.

I love this time of the year better, perhaps, than all other seasons, for I can look forward to the time, so rapidly drawing near, when I shall be sniffing the night wind blowing across from Holy Island. I seem to hear the distant baying of the brents and the soft whistle of the widgeon packs, and the murmur of the wind in these Midland hedgerows becomes for a second the beating pulse of the sea. Expectation is a great thing, my masters, and such thoughts are great thoughts for me.

Habits of Foxes

Not far from my house there is a series of ponds, one below the other, divided by narrow embankments. The upper pool is now completely overgrown with thick reeds and later on this is a wonderful place to find a fox.

On the last pond there is an island where long ago there was a swannery. Now the tall trees have fallen, or most of them, and this pool too is almost completely choked with reeds. But a vixen uses this island every year for breeding and we always find six or seven foxes.

This morning, hounds found first in the upper reed bed, and the cub went over on the island for refuge. Soon the hounds were all about among the reeds, some squattering through deep mud and slime to the island, where they quickly chopped him. Terrified moorhens flew out from the ivy bushes, and the usually quiet little valley was hideous with sound. There is sometimes a litter of cubs in an earth on the bank of this same pool and I have often watched them at play under the big horse-chestnut root.

As a rule a vixen will not kill near her earth, but this is by no means a fixed rule, for a woman who keeps poultry about a quarter of a mile away often loses a hen when the cubs are growing.

I do not suppose there are many people who like cub hunting, but it is a necessary work, both for killing off foxes and for training the young entry.

A short while ago an earth in the Pytchley county was found to contain several golf balls that the vixen had brought her babies, whether she thought they were eggs—which in my opinion is most likely—or whether she brought them the balls to play with, it is hard to say. But cubs are, of course, most playful little creatures and I have often watched them rolling stones about and batting at sticks.

A farmer friend told me that he witnessed a curious incident the other day. He keeps his hens in a pen on wheels, below the farm, only about a hundred yards from his house. A fox, hard pressed by the hounds, came up from the railway and ran through the fowls as they fluttered in a panic round the shed. It seized one and killed it, carrying it some way and then dropping it. One always understood from writings on the fox that he slings his prey over his shoulder, but I do not think this is true. I have seen foxes kill chickens and ducks and carry them off, but they have always held them by the body—usually the poor creature is still alive and screaming—and I have never seen them attempt to carry the corpse on their backs.

Foxes will, however, lie out in a field where ducks and hens are wandering about and wait until one comes near enough to pounce

upon. Ducks especially are such inquisitive creatures that they must always investigate anything they do not understand.

I have many times found lambs lying in the mouth of a fox's earth, but I doubt if there is any record of a fox killing a healthy lamb. They may take a dying animal, indeed they do in the Fell country, but one finds a bigger type of fox in hill districts.

Fieldfares Over

I had an interesting experience during this last week. Accompanied by a small boy friend, I went bird-watching on a large sheet of water about twenty miles from my home. We saw a flock of about fifteen dunlin, twenty or thirty shoveler, several widgeon in winter kit, and last, but not least, wild geese. I had been talking to my young friend about wild geese and their habits only a moment before. Two large birds took off from the upper end of the lake and came towards us and we got down behind the fence. The great fowl passed within thirty yards of us, and my young companion nearly cried because he had no gun!

This is the first time I have seen wild geese on this particular sheet of water; they were undoubtedly wanderers and will soon pass on. I think this month and the next are peculiarly attractive to the rough shooter. There is an excitement in the air; the woods take on a different guise, even the hedges are mysterious.

This afternoon, as I set out for my walk round, I had this feeling very strongly. It was to be a 'wold' afternoon, as it is some time since I shot this district. When I passed up the green lane I heard fieldfares 'chuck chucking' overhead, and I looked up through the amber oak leaves to see a straggling party coming from the north. There was 'nothing doing' up the ride, but as I half expected, I found a successor to the old rabbit lying up in the nettles of the little dried-up pond out on the rising hill.

This afternoon the new tenant played the same trick. He slipped out under the wire and nipped up the hill, and though I dusted his cotton-tail, he got away. I think the trouble is the

ground rises steeply above the little pond, and this somehow throws out one's aim.

Hunting down several new hedges that I have not shot before, I missed three rabbits, all snap-shots. Then I made a pretty shot at a rabbit that the spaniel pushed out of the hedge-bottom, and which was doubling between the stems of a hawthorn thicket. A little lower down I had another long shot, quite eighty yards, and a clean kill.

After a vain skirmish after partridge that eventually got up a long way ahead and departed over the wolds, I turned for home. There were some roosting pigeons in the tall oaks down the ride, and I stole on them unawares. Though the light was poor I brought one tumbling down in a cloud of feathers, and the spaniel brought it to me out of the ditch.

At the far end of the green ride a thin blue mist was gathering against the calm sky; the half-naked hawthorn made delicate tracery. So vivid were the colours of the dying leaves, they almost looked incandescent, and the skeleton of the twigs showed blackly in the midst of the autumn fires.

Far away a blackbird was scolding; and there, above the scented oaks, the plough hung shining softly in the violet sky.

Brer Rabbit

Have you ever noticed how rabbits seem to like to lie out after rain? I shot the home shoot this afternoon and was impressed by this fact. On a fine sunny afternoon I seldom put up more than half a dozen, but after wet, double that figure. This is strange, as rabbits are reputed to dislike wet and one seldom sees a rabbit feeding in wet grass.

The first shot was a blank. The spaniel put a rabbit out of a clump of herbage and for a moment I saw it crouching, dragged and grey, under the thorns. Then the spaniel came up and the rabbit bolted, not across the dry land but over mud and water in the pond close by. I had a fleeting glimpse of its dragged body slipping behind a willow and my shot sent the bark flying. Brer

Rabbit got away. I had several misses after this, one a disgraceful one. Then the dog put out a rabbit from a hedge-bottom, and it came down a steep path directly for me. My first shot struck the ground just in front and the second hit him for six.

As I was coming home along the old glebe lands, a fine covey of partridge suddenly swept over a high thorn hedge, right on top of me. The gun went up and for a fraction of a second barrel and birds swung across together. Then there was a double report and two leading birds tumbled into the ditch close by.

Then I tried the little ash spinney. I climbed the wire and waited quietly behind an ash stole. The spaniel began to yelp and a rabbit came hopping towards me through the wood. I let him come past me at three yards range and I could see his nostrils quivering, and the wide, frightened eye. On he hopped, ignoring me, and vanished into the underwood. It would have been sheer murder to have shot him!

No mallard were on the pools, only drifting rusty leaves, the flotsam of autumn.

Intricate Hedgerow Beauty

There is something very fascinating about a hedge-bottom. From childhood I have always been bewitched by those intricate woven strands of laid thorn and tangles of vegetation. They hold the shadows, even in winter when there are no leaves, and from these thorny jungles the strong straight shoots of young alder and ash rise like slender masts.

Here an old blackbird's nest, full of red berries and seeds, where the mice have stored their harvests, there an ivied root where certainly gnomes must dwell, who venture forth when no foot-fall sounds on the white road. Now the leaves have dropped and the mysteries of veiling foliage have been lifted, but still there is cover enough for the little hedgerow folk, and unless you look closely, you will miss them.

This afternoon I saw a wee red mouse scurrying along the laid branches, in and out of the shadow. He moved with ease, more

rapidly than we travel the open surface of the road, and for some way I ran opposite to him—I had to run to keep pace with him. Sometimes he would stop and look at me, and I could see his little eye, shining like a polished agate.

He went to ground at last in a little cave of roots where the ivy half screened the entrance with neat cut leaves, and rose pink leaves of a sloe bush had scattered a colourful carpet.

Wild Pastures

A beautiful afternoon, sunny but with a hint of frost to come. I wanted to give the pools a rest as there are some more duck about, and I do not want to shoot them too much for fear they go right away. So I decided to visit a small shoot of mine about three miles distant. First of all I walked up the old deserted road, grass-grown and fringed with yellowing elms; the hedges on either side form good cover for rabbits. I walked the whole length without a shot, however, and then struck out for the big, wide, rolling fields that once formed part of a wold and are some of the wildest pastures around here. A large covey of partridge got up, out of range, on the high ground and I got nothing until I descended into the valley. Here the dog put a rabbit out of a little spinney of poplars and I bowled it over. At the shot, two snipe rose from the brook below and circled high in the air, far out of range. I missed four more easy shots at rabbits (indeed I have not shot so badly for a long while) and it was not until I turned homewards that I had another shot at a rabbit that jumped out of the ditch. It described several somersaults and lay still. As I returned down the old grass-grown ride, scores of redwing passed over against a fine sunset sky, calling one to the other. Winter is indeed not far distant.

First Frosts

The duck seem to have left my pools for good; the last two Saturdays I have drawn a complete blank. It was the same yesterday when I stole up behind the reeds; nothing rose from the grey water where the lily-pads are rotten and brown with the first frosts.

I sent my spaniel first of all into the reeds, and at once a rabbit hopped out, which I killed with a clean shot as he went away from me down the fence side. I got another a little farther down, then went up the hill towards the stubble fields. Many partridges got up at various points, well out of range, and they seemed hopelessly shy. Remembering the pigeon from last week, I waited in the wood as it began to get dusk, standing under a large oak tree that still retained some of its rusty leaves. When the light had faded, two came into the very tree under which I was standing and I brought one down. At the report of the gun, I heard a great number 'clapper' off lower down the wood, and a minute later they came circling overhead. I fired again as they passed over, but did not touch one. For a long time nothing came and I was alone with those little secret noises and damp sweet scents of an autumn wood at dusk. A little wood-mouse rustled in some dead leaves, an owl hooted far away in the deeper covers, then a complete hush descended. Soon it got too dark to see, and very reluctantly I took my way homewards.



Chapter the Twelfth

Solway Sunset

Shot golden plover at Red Kirk Point, with W. My spaniel, Sport, had great difficulty in retrieving one bird which fell out on the tide, and for a long while I thought he would be carried away. But he landed a long way down the coast and brought the plover back to me.

I was standing on a spit of sand that ran out into the estuary, and just at dusk the 'golden' started to come in from behind me, where they had been feeding in the fields. They passed over at an incredible speed and I could hear a sort of whizz and see a twisting, darting shape speeding over the water. This type of shooting takes a lot of skill, especially in the dying light. I had several, all the same, and then I heard W. shout: 'Look out! Duck!'

I turned and saw a large team of mallard passing over, but they were too high as the evening was calm. There was a perfectly wonderful sunset over the firth to-night.

All the fishing nets were outlined black and rigid against the blood-red water and the sky was a perfect blaze of colour. As I stood on the lonely shore and heard the whistle of wings as the mallard sped over, I was filled with a vague uneasiness.

The Blue of Far Skiddaw

Saw the first geese come in, five birds in a line, they looked like grey-lags.

Golden plover shooting may be wonderful sport. There is something about the golden plover and his cousin, the grey, that reminds me of the gazelles of the animal world; they have the most expressive eyes of any bird I know, eyes that seem to retain

a sorrowful and solemn look even after death, which I must confess to find a little disturbing at times.

For the golden plover is one of my favourite birds; I like the streamlined body, the hunched shoulders that suggest swift flight, the intelligent forehead, and the exquisite black and gold plumage so cunningly marked. He is certainly one of the most sporting birds to be met upon the marshes, and as for his gastronomical qualities—you will know them for yourself. . . .

One evening I had a most enjoyable time shooting 'goldies' on the Solway. I arrived at my chosen spot in good time, the tide had just turned, and I settled down comfortably in my trench to enjoy a pipe and admire the beautiful scene before me. It was a perfect evening; over the water I could see the blue hills of Cumberland and the Peak district, while to the right, Skiddaw reared his imposing bulk against the pale sky.

The still waters of the firth lay silver and grey below, and over the sandbanks big 'black backs' were croaking one to another. As soon as the falling tide had exposed the slimy green stones at the foot of the bank, I heard the first rich pipe of the 'goldies' as they came in from the fields.

I lowered myself into the trench and pressed the catch across to 'load', and a minute later a flock of about twenty came swiftly down the tide, offering me a broadside at forty yards. I saw two drop, and my dog fetched them in. Quickly the tide fell, and on the other side of the main channel the big sandbanks began to appear. As soon as this took place, a great many 'shank and gulls began to collect opposite me on the newly exposed sand until there must have been hundreds, crowded into an area of a few square yards. The golden plover also began to drop down to join the crowd, instead of coming over to me, but I soon noticed that they never stayed long on the sands, but flew over to my side of the channel. Very soon, by careful shooting, I had nine birds in my trench and had lost two—that my dog had failed to get for me.

It is interesting to notice that plovers and gulls, when they

reach the sea, swerve and tumble in the air, and it is therefore wise to fire at the former before they cross the bank, for you will never hit a swerving 'goldie'. Curlew often do the same thing.

Just as it got dark, a curlew came over me and I dropped him among the broken turves along the foot of the bank, and in the dusk it was a long time before I could find him, even with the help of my dog. But at last I stumbled on him, a fine fat bird in the pink of condition.

Curlews, when flying towards you, may often be mistaken for gulls, as their flight is very similar indeed. The curlew is quicker on the wing, however, and the wing beats are faster. They frequently fly in ordered formation, like ducks or geese.

I should imagine that a twenty-bore, or even a sixteen, would be a useful gun for golden, as they are light guns and easily swung. You must be very quick to follow through, for the goldie travels at a great pace.

When a golden plover alights on the foreshore he does not at once begin to feed as do other small shore birds, but stands perfectly still, taking stock of his immediate surroundings with those great eyes of his.

Even when satisfied that no danger is present, he will run forward on twinkling legs and constantly stop to look about him. They are very hard to see once they have alighted on the shore, for their plumage blends in a wonderful way with their surroundings. On wing, when they have got well going, they fly in purposeful formation and with rapid wing-beats. I always feel that it is a bird of great strength of character, very different from his gentle and effeminate brother, the green, whose wandering woolly flight seems always so typical of the bird.

He is an aristocrat, every gold-spangled inch of him, and I take my hat off to a very gallant and sporting little gentleman.

Golden plover spend a great deal of their time inland, feeding in the fields. Especially do they like the low lying marshy meadows of pasture land, and in the winter, vast flocks sometimes assemble on the plough, along with green plover. If they feed

near an estuary, they will flight out to it at fall of night and roost on the high sands alongside other waders. It often happens that, having had one shot at a flock and maybe dropping one or two birds, the rest will wheel back overhead and you may get another shot.

Tides Ending

This evening, T. and I motored to the brew houses for the flight. When we arrived at the fishermen's cottages we found the men about to set out for the evening's fishing, so Steel took us on board his punt and put us over on the high sands.

He had to 'pick-a-back' me over to the punt, moored in the tideway, as I had come without my waders. Half way over, Steel got out of the punt with his nets, and I poled on up the coast towards Red Kirk Point.

The tide was dropping, and as the sands became exposed, hundreds of plover, golden and green, began to mass on the edge of the water. Gulls soon joined them, and other small waders, such as dunlin and sandpipers, and millions of ringed plover.

The evening was beautifully calm and there was not a breath of wind. I landed on the sands and T. went off, farther down towards the brew houses. As it got dusk, the curlew began to come in off the fields which were stacked up for carrying.

I found that by crouching down the curlew did not see me, and I dropped several birds all round me. Once I fired an Eley rocket cartridge and it soared up over the fishermen out in the firth, and though they were such a long distance away, fully half a mile or more, so calm was the night that I could hear their startled exclamations as they watched its brilliant course across the sky. I had fired it at a curlew, and though the magnesium flare passed extremely close, I failed to bring the bird down. These shells are very useful for testing mistakes in shooting, and you can soon see where your shots are missing the target.

When it was nearly dark, a large team of mallard passed over, very high, coming from the direction of the Cumberland coast.

Solway Dusk

A windy wild evening with a bitter north wind. Arrived alone at the brew houses at about four o'clock and walked up to the point with the eight-bore and the twelve. I waded the ford and got down in the hide overlooking the water. The tide, which had been a very high one, was dropping, but so fast was it running that I had some difficulty in wading the stream. Nothing came in, however, not even a gull. Where the curlew go to in the winter, on the Solway, has always been a mystery to me.

I soon saw a few duck coming in lower down, so I got out of the hide and retraced my steps. Very soon I had three duck over me, flying very fast before the wind. I shot one and it fell out in the field. Soon after, two more came and I hit another, bringing it down in some rushes about three yards from where I was hiding on the sea-bank. Then a single bird came in and I missed him. This last shot was an easy one, but it is often the case with 'citters'; you are too confident of success and miss entirely.

Wind in the Tree-tops

A blustering wind, reminding me of March days and lambs; a wind that combed out the grass and bent the bare thorn hedges until they seemed to shriek for mercy. Such was this afternoon.

A rabbit came bolting towards me down the side of a hedge, and my first hurried shot kicked up the turf at its feet (I always find these head-on shots terribly hard to gauge), but as the little beast 'jinked' I hit him for six with the left, killing him instantly.

A second later the spaniel emerged with a most laughable questioning look on his freckled face; he had heard the shot but had not seen the rabbit. There were some pigeon flying around near a field of greens, and after two bad misses, I dropped one as it rose into the wind, on the other side of a stone wall. Then, as the bright afternoon was drawing to a close, I made all haste for Hieaway. There was a most glorious sky of wind-swept blue

against which sailed mighty billowing ships. Above, and very high, cirrus cloud was combed out in wavy lines. Below, peeping over the green crest of the rising ground, I could see the bristly top of Hieaway, with here and there a ragged black fir.

I soon entered the wood by the familiar hand-gate and saw recent traces of pigeon everywhere; indeed it looked as though a very large flock of birds had been there the night before.

Droppings were scattered all over the dead leaves and there were little scraps of blue fluff blowing in the box bushes.

I quickly got into position in the thick bushes, cuddling down under the privet with my gun propped on a convenient branch and the butt ready in my shoulder. I give no quarter to pigeon and slaughter every bird I can. Above me was one little square of sky against which branches tossed. The blue of the sky faded to green, but not a pigeon showed up; not even a carrion was to be seen or heard.

I lay listening to the wind in the tree-tops (the wood was restless to-night), the dead leaves rustling and chasing one another over the floor of the wood. A little group of them seemed to be playing a fairy dance round the foot of an oak, whirling round and round, then with a flurry they lay still.

It grew steadily darker and yet darker and I began to marvel that not a bird was to be seen or heard. At length, so amazed was I that I got up and searched the wood, first under the firs and then down my favourite ride.

Night came and I left the wood. When I got to the road I opened the breech to withdraw the cartridge. In the right barrel, which I should have fired had any pigeon showed up, was a 16-bore cartridge!

Shooting Party

I was lucky enough to be asked to an excellent shoot last Thursday. I could not arrive until luncheon and found things had gone quite well; twelve brace of birds and some hares lay alongside the cars drawn up on the grass. I went forward with three other guns

to await the first drive. A venturesome little owl lost his life in essaying to cross over my host on my extreme left. The sun shone down warmly while we waited, and the first redwings were busy among the red hips in the thorn hedge in front. There was that tenseness one always feels before a drive, and a distant shot sent each man on to one knee, for there were guns with the beaters. Then came the long-drawn shrill of the keeper's whistle. I saw a large covey sneaking up the ditch, twenty yards away. The agitated brown heads bobbed and ran and the birds took wing, not over us but over the left-hand hedge where no guns were posted. This first drive was a complete failure, all the birds going over this hedge.

However we fared better the second time. I was nervous, for I have done little shooting at driven partridge, and as luck would have it my host was the next gun to me. I heard the whistle and a second later a covey swept over the hedge in front, saw me, and swerved right-handed. I felt critical eyes on me as I swung up my gun and picked my bird. I fired, and the brown whirring shape crumpled and hit the ground. A second later another whistle, and a single bird sped over the ragged thorn hedge and went straight out over the plough. It was a long shot, but the choke reached him, and he too hit the plough. I had another shot and downed my bird, a runner, and this we failed to pick up after the drive. Two other shots were misses, and to finish I walked with another gun outside a spinney, while keepers and guns walked through. I heard 'cock over!' and beheld a sudden whirring shape right over my head. It was an easy shot—I missed! My companion missed with both barrels and this was the last shot I had.

Total bag for nine guns: 22½ brace, 4 hares and a brace of pheasant. Birds were wild and would not be walked. As I said 'goodbye and thank you' to my host, he said casually: 'We shall be shooting next week. Come along, can you?' So I shall go.

Thursday Afternoon

Thursday afternoon proved rather disappointing, but this was entirely due to the weather. Though the sun was shining, a great wind raged, and it was not surprising, therefore, that when I arrived at one-thirty where the guns were assembled I found that they had only shot seven brace of birds and a few pheasants.

With my heavy gun, I could foresee that I should have to shoot well, and later this conjecture proved well founded.

How few people realize that when two or more guns are gathered together, then is the risk of accident much greater! I saw a loader go through a hedge with a gun pointing over his shoulder, directly in line with guns behind. People are inclined to become careless over these matters, especially when they have been shooting many years without accident. Then one day comes tragedy, swift and sudden, and it is too late to learn the lesson.

We walked up some extensive woodland and managed to bag six brace of pheasant and a hare. After this, several more drives, birds coming wild and high with the wind at their backs. I missed two birds over me, but the sun was in my eyes, and I shot badly.

I heard an amusing story the other day. The local parson, a keen sportsman (which is the best type of cleric the world over), is very keen on piking in the winter. Not so very long ago a parishioner wanted a baby baptized and made the necessary application to that worthy padre. There appeared to be difficulties in the way, and then it was ascertained that the font was full of live baits being kept fresh against the morrow!

Stubble Shooting

Thursday afternoon turned out sunny and sharp, after an early rain and grey clouded skies.

I was due to shoot at F——, about twelve miles distant, but could not get there until lunch, when I found the guns having a snack under a barn. Sport had been poor, only about two brace of pheasant and a partridge being shot during the morning.

I started off with two other guns to walk some stubble. My companions went into an adjoining field and I was left to walk slowly up a lucerne field and rejoin them higher up. A few minutes later I heard a shot, then a wild 'hallo!' For a few minutes nothing happened, and then across the sunlit field I saw a hare slipping along, about a hundred yards away and heading in a line that would take him a long shot off me. I waited and then lifted the gun. I saw the shot strike short, but I think the pellet struck the hare, for it winced and slowed perceptibly. I fired my other barrel and it rolled over, a good seventy yards away. If I had not been using my magnum I could never have got him.

We had several shots at partridge and bagged two brace, but the birds were very wild and we could not get near them. Coming home, I heard a movement as I was crossing a stubble field and, twisting round, saw a great hare going away behind! A hurried shot from both barrels missed completely and it went away unscathed.

The Gentle Fields

It seemed to me, as I started out this afternoon, that winter had arrived. It seemed, too, a long while since I last was out on these familiar fields, which I have described so often that you must know them as well as I. First the pools with the rusty red beds, then the hill meadows towards the river, then the glebe lands with the meandering brook and the little stone bridge; then the oak spinney where I missed a woodcock three years ago, and so back by the marshy plover-haunted pasture and the stubbles.

A mighty wind was blowing summer memories away, aye, and autumn memories too, for the leaves were flying from the oaks, and fieldfares passed over; I saw them between bare, wind-tossed branches. We change, our attitude to life changes, but the earth and the seasons seem eternal, so much so that the mind wearies to think of the millions of autumn days that have passed and which must come. We struggle, we fight, we kill each other (even in this so-called enlightened age), but the world of nature remains apart,

serene and unchanging. Thus it is the fieldfares must have passed over the tossing branches of some mighty oak so many countless times and man has watched them and wondered, and felt how insecure his sample of life is.

Shooting, with all the joys and the friends that it brings, makes one love the outdoor life and the gentle fields and spinneys of England. Therefore I am not ashamed to write of philosophical matters, for, as I say, they are bound up with the sport we love so much. To descend to more mundane subjects.

My cook has devised a dish which I have named 'Hunter's Pudding' and I can confidently recommend it. Pigeon, rabbits, and even moorhen (if skinned) are cooked in a basin, with plentiful lashings of carrot and potato, and you have a dish fit for a king. I remembered this savoury dish when I urged my spaniel to 'go seek' this afternoon, and so well did he work that in a short space of time I killed six rabbits, two out of the dead reeds and the others in the old glebe hedge beyond the bridge. Some fine plump pigeon were about the oaks, feeding on the acorns in a ditch. Two of these found their way into the bag, and my shoulder ached before I reached the home paddock with only one cartridge left out of a pocketful of fourteen.

Now a pipe, my master, and a good log fire! With my dog at my feet, licking his paws and pulling out the burrs, the firelight on the ceiling and the wind making music in the limes outside, what more could a fellow want?

Wildwood, Goodbye!

This evening, my walk took me past Wildwood. Gone now were the massed banks of willow herb and nettles, gone the spreading mystery of tangled leaves. Gaunt and bare, the oaks reared their hoary heads against a wild sunset sky of pale yellow, and the ash poles stood erect, rank on rank, etched against the background. On the pool itself, so black and sinister, where the trees leant over as if to catch their own reflections, two mallard swam uneasily, and, when I made as if to descend the hill, they took swift wing and circled the confines of the wood.

I opened the hand-gate and walked slowly up the centre ride, eyes and ears alert. There is a mystery still to be found in woods at twilight, even in the twentieth century. I imagined that my presence was known to many little woodland people and my every movement noted. Shapes that I would never see were skulking in the shadows beneath the stunted pines, many sharp eyes—eyes on which lives depended—marked my every movement. Yet I was harmless enough to-night, for I carried no gun.

Walking slowly up the rutted track towards the sunset that was shining through a grill of winter trees, I reached at length the oak where I once dreamed away a whole lovely summer afternoon, and stood awhile there, my back to its rough trunk. I was facing the clearing and the piles of wood stacked for fencing. In the twilight the newly-cut ash stoles shone out white and vivid, and all about were spotless chips from the woodcutter's axe.

Then over the bristly tops of the poles a swarm of black specks appeared, so many I could not count them. They wheeled and wheeled again, and in a moment the air above me was full of gliding shapes as the pigeon came in to roost. In the space of a minute or so every bird had come to rest, some balancing themselves precariously on slender branches, others lower down and perched more comfortably, craning their heads on all sides. I suppose there must have been four or five hundred birds all about me; one or two were in the very tree under which I was standing. Those birds that were more distant looked like clots of withered leaves on the ash pole tops. The clapping and rattling of wings died down and all was quiet. Blackbirds chinked down in the thick underwood. Then I was aware of a black something that had emerged from the side of the ride. It paused for a moment in the shadows and then started to cross the open space. Half way over it stopped and I saw it was a fox. The ears pricked forward and he was looking intently in my direction. For a moment he stood thus, a sinister little figure. Then his muzzle bent and he sniffed the ride where I had passed. Still uncertain, he stood, and when I looked again I had lost him in the shadows.

Now the pigeon began to drop down by twos and threes into the ash poles and soon the higher tops were bare again of birds. These wanderers from over the sea were already half asleep, as were the small birds all around me in the bushes. But for Reynard and the owls, day had come again. I looked westwards and only a faint glimmer showed where the sun had gone down.

THE END



TIDES ENDING

See where those leaning poplars stand
Along the far sea wall?
That is the outpost of the land
There is the end of all,
Geese in skein, and the sound again
Of their clanging bugles blending,
Samphire scent, and a great content
In the place I call Tides Ending.

Follow the sheep tracks winding thread
Draw deep the dawn wind blowing,
All the world is grey and dead,
Only the tide is flowing,
Curlews call from the dim sea wall
We'll take what the gods are sending
The first gulls come, the flight's begun
In the place I call Tides Ending.

Mark yon wheel of the Bar Point light
Uneasy in the gloaming,
Timid spark in the womb of night,
Guide for a curlews' homing
Whistle of wings and ghostly things
Beyond all comprehending,
Tang of the sea, and a soul set free
In the place I call Tides Ending.

Country Life, October 19, 1935.

WILD GEESE ON MIGRATION

A red moon over the land,
A white mist over the bay,
And the hounds of the sky
Have passed me by
And their yelping died away.

A sudden secret breeze,
A lemon flush to the west,
And out on the bar
Where no men are
A weary host, at rest.

Game and Gun, Xmas 1934.

